

VIOLENCE IN THE SCHOOLS:

*Let's work
on it together!*



PRESENTATION

In 2008, the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport (MELS) announced its action plan *Violence in the schools: Let's work on it together!* in order to encourage and support school communities in preventing and dealing with violence. The 2008-2011 action plan has four focuses: 1) preventing and dealing with violence, 2) joint action and training, 3) research and documentation, and 4) follow-up and evaluation.

One of the upcoming initiatives related to the third focus is the publication of a semi-annual newsletter to provide up-to-date information on preventing and dealing with violence in schools. The newsletter will present information on innovative projects, best practices and new developments in the field, as well as important events and the various measures implemented as part of the action plan, and interviews with people who work in the field. We also hope to promote information sharing between researchers and educators. In short, the newsletter aims to foster a culture of violence prevention in schools.

This first issue of the newsletter will focus on recognizing the presence of violence in schools. A description of its main causes and consequences will be included, with an overview of various resources, attitudes and practices to prevent violence or deal with it.

**The 2008-2011 action plan
has four focuses:**

- 1) preventing and dealing with violence**
- 2) joint action and training**
- 3) research and documentation**
- 4) follow-up and evaluation**

This issue will also discuss collaboration and partnerships, key factors in successful intervention programs, and provide suggestions to help schools as they decide what action to take.

We hope you will find this newsletter thought-provoking and useful. **Happy reading!**

What exactly is violence in the schools?

The very idea of violence in the schools has changed over time, varying in meaning depending on the context. The Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport has drawn up its own definition of violence adapted to the Québec education context, in order to prevent violence and take effective action when it occurs in schools. This definition is as follows:

Any use of force—verbal, written, physical, psychological or sexual—against any person, by an individual or a group, with intent to directly or indirectly wrong, injure or oppress that person by attacking his or her integrity, psychological or physical well-being, rights or property (MELS, 2009).

Researchers have found that violent acts committed on a frequent, repetitive basis are the most harmful to victims and to the overall school climate. Physical violence, the easiest form to recognize, includes shoving, hitting, fighting and biting, and damages victims both physically and psychologically. Verbal violence, on the other hand, involves threats, insults, mockery or malicious speech, and is often perpetrated by individuals with poor impulse control, i.e. those who have not learned appropriate strategies for dealing with personal, social or academic problems.

Bullying occurs when a stronger aggressor exerts power over a weaker victim (Smith, 2005). Bullying can be physical, verbal or written, or it can involve social exclusion of the victim. Bullying behaviour includes threats, humiliation, extortion (“taxing”), and ignoring, socially isolating or refusing to communicate with the victim (indirect aggression). Physical acts or hateful or humiliating speech toward others because of their sexual orientation, ethnic origin or any other social, religious or racial characteristic are also considered violence. In many countries, bullying is defined as threatening behaviour of a repetitive nature (Olweus, 1993). Whether it occurs between students or adults, bullying can have a negative impact on bystanders as well as

VIOLENCE IN THE SCHOOLS:

*Let's work
on it together!*

victims. It is important to note that bullying is the form of violence most frequently reported among students in the school environment. Also known as psychological harassment, it is also the most prevalent form of violence among adults in the workplace in Québec.

Finally, cyberbullying is a phenomenon that can no longer be ignored. Perpetrators of this new form of violence violate another person's dignity using information technology, particularly the Internet. Cyberbullying

Researchers have found that violent acts committed on a frequent, repetitive basis are the most harmful to victims and to the overall school climate.

includes insults, threats or hate speech communicated by e-mail, instant messaging or Web postings (e.g. YouTube). Young people between the ages of 10 and 17 (mainly girls) are most likely to be involved in this form of violence, as both victims and perpetrators. It is observed that cyberbullies are often motivated by revenge or a need for social recognition. The lack of emotion shown by the bully with regard to the impact of his or her words on the victim increases the level of cruelty and means that this type of bullying causes even more damage than traditional bullying, especially in light of the unlimited number of potential witnesses through information technology. While only five per cent of teachers in Québec have reported being victims of cyberbullying (CSQ, 2008), research shows that the phenomenon is growing everywhere in the world, and that parents and school employees must take action to prevent this kind of violence.

Can this violence be explained?

Violence has been recognized by the World Health Organization as a very real threat to public health (WHO, 2002) due to the personal and social consequences for victims, witnesses and perpetrators alike. It is important to understand the causes of violence in order to act effectively to limit its consequences. The problem is complex, with a number of interrelated factors contributing

to the violence between fellow students, between students and teachers, between parents and teachers, and between coworkers. Some writers even refer to a type of violence that can be perpetrated by the school itself through its management or organizational style (Debarbieux, 2006; Fotinos, 2006).

Studies attempting to explain the trend have shown that the more shortcomings a person experiences in various aspects of life, whether individual (e.g. IQ, temperament), familial (e.g. family income, parental supervision), social (e.g. social skills, relationships with peers) or academic (e.g. size of school, discipline and supervision, teacher/student relationships, school performance), the greater his or her risk of developing aggressive behaviours or falling victim to them.

What are the consequences of violence for people and for the school environment?

The negative repercussions for those involved in violent situations are often serious, and sometimes tragic, since victims of violence have been known to take their own lives due to feelings of powerlessness. There are certain warning signs to look out for in order to identify the victims of violence around us, who often suffer in silence. Such individuals often show signs such as anxiety, depression, eating disorders, self-mutilation or loss of motivation. Students who are victims of physical or psychological violence (e.g. bullying, harassment, discrimination, social rejection) often display avoidance behaviours such as frequent absences and tardiness. The increased risk of dropping out for students suffering from depression has already been noted by several Québec researchers. In fact, victims and witnesses of violence are not the only ones to suffer serious consequences—the perpetrators also face an increased risk of future mental health problems, social adjustment problems (addiction, crime, conjugal violence) and dropping out of school. In a 2006 study, Blaya showed that 80 per cent of school dropouts had been either victims, or both victims and perpetrators, of repeated violence and bullying at school.

Violence in school also has negative consequences on the adults who fall victim to it. Whether they are victimized by students,

The problem is complex, with a number of interrelated factors contributing to the violence between fellow students, between students and teachers, between parents and teachers, and between coworkers.

colleagues or parents, adult victims can suffer chronic symptoms such as sleep disorders, fatigue, headaches, stomachaches, heart palpitations and digestive problems. These negative effects can have an impact on the quality of the victim's work and that of coworkers. If the victim does not receive help, he or she may miss work and experience increased levels of fear and distrust, loss of motivation, doubts regarding his or her competence, relational conflicts and isolation, and even end up abandoning the teaching profession (Leclerc, 2007). Since, as Jeffrey and Sun (2006) have shown, younger teachers are most often the victims of violence in schools, and they have a greater likelihood of leaving the teaching profession, it is important that they be provided with support from the very outset of their professional careers.

Violence in school also has negative consequences on the adults who fall victim to it.

Key factors in preventing and addressing violence in schools

In addition to the various intervention programs available, there are resources, attitudes and practices that can help foster a positive and stimulating social and academic climate. Researchers seeking to explain why some schools are less affected by violence than others have identified certain factors related to the school's organizational model, attitudes, and communication and support networks that may be responsible for the overall atmosphere of these schools.

The level of collaboration among the adults in the school community and their commitment are key factors in the prevention of violence. It would appear that the adults' adherence to the values espoused by the school and their resulting sense of belonging help to

VIOLENCE IN THE SCHOOLS:

Let's work
on it together!

Students who are victims of physical or psychological violence (e.g. bullying, harassment, discrimination, social rejection) often display avoidance behaviours such as frequent absences and tardiness.

foster a climate conducive to violence prevention. Another factor present in schools with low levels of violence is the stability of the teaching staff. The existence of a consistent disciplinary framework and a clear school policy known to students, staff and parents, particularly with regard to acts of violence, contributes to a safe and healthy school climate. Other key ingredients include the use of positive reinforcement rather than solely punitive measures, programs designed to improve students' social skills (e.g. conflict resolution, anger management), peer-support networks (e.g. peer mediation, peer counselling, cooperative learning) and a high level of student input in the organization of school life, from the planning phase through to implementation.

The level of collaboration among the adults in the school community and their commitment are key factors in the prevention of violence.

Several studies have shown that programs whereby parents and members of the community are involved in violence prevention are particularly effective, and have lasting results. It is important to stress that a violence prevention program should be an integral component of the schools' general plan. The problem is extremely complex and must be properly identified so that the measures adopted truly correspond to the school's needs.

Finally, researchers evaluating programs to reduce violence in schools have concluded that it can take between one and five years for changes to be noticeable and measurable by assessment tools, and that these changes depend on the manner in which the programs are implemented. It is thus recommended that all the factors described above concerning attitudes, joint efforts and partnership be taken into account in order to increase the chances of success of the initiatives launched by schools.

Collaboration and partnership for the successful implementation of measures

When colleagues, parents and members of the community work together, a rich support network is created for fostering academic success among students. The commitment of MELS to promoting various types of partnerships is reflected in various major documents such as the *Québec Education Program* (2001), the framework document on complementary educational services (2002), the Policy on Special Education (1999) and the 2003 MELS-MSSS agreement, notably the Healthy Schools program. Collaboration is a key element in the success of the *Violence in the schools: Let's work on it together!* action plan. While school-related risk and protective factors seem to be particularly important in determining a student's likelihood of developing aggressive behaviours, the school alone cannot carry the burden of responsibility for reducing violence among young people. To this effect, Benbenishty and Astor (2006) propose a model to explain the development of violence in school, placing the school at the centre of diverse influences exerting pressure on the individual. In this way, they associate the development of various forms of violence with the quality of social support in the school, with family influences and with socioeconomic and cultural factors. According to them, collaborative efforts observed among key players in the school serve to further students' social and academic adjustment, reduce the risk of failure and dropping out, and improve quality of personal and professional support among teachers. In schools where collaborative practices are most developed, there is also better communication with parents, enabling them in turn to develop an increased sense of parental competence (Gottfredson, 2001).

But the school is not the only environment where young people can learn respectful social behaviour. In addition to students' own families, other organizations can work in tandem with the schools to implement preventive or educational measures. In Québec, several educational institutions are already working in partnership with health and social services centres, youth centres, police departments, universities and community organizations (youth shelters, Kids Help Phone, Tel-Aide, etc.).

Joint efforts such as these permit the pooling of resources in order to reach youth in many contexts, and constitute a powerful factor in the success of measures to prevent and curb violence in schools.

But the school is not the only environment where young people can learn respectful social behaviour.

Defining your own action plan (local intervention strategy) to counter violence in schools: Tips for smooth implementation

Preventing school violence can be carried out more simply and effectively if it stems from a process of reflection, collaboration, planning, and evaluation. To help schools as they implement their action plans for addressing school violence, Cowie and Jennifer (2007) have proposed an eight-step process, which can serve as a model for institutions developing their own programs. Some of the measures listed have already been adopted by certain schools. Here are the recommendations formulated by the British researchers:

The support offered by MELS to schools and school boards in this undertaking will include recommendations based on the above guidelines, adapted to the Québec educational reality. If necessary, the selected measures can be modified to harmonize with any violence prevention measures already in place.

Research suggests certain advantages of local planning. For example, school employees are invited not only to participate but also to express their expectations with regard to an action plan designed to prevent and deal with violence in schools. This dialogue will ensure a greater commitment to the initiative on the part of the staff and thereby increase the chances of success. Furthermore, the information gathered at each of these phases will be useful for making decisions to meet the needs expressed, setting priorities and evaluating measures taken. This will provide the opportunity for building rich professional relationships between the various schools as they develop specific areas of expertise with regard to the initiatives they have piloted.

VIOLENCE IN THE SCHOOLS:

Let's work
on it together!

The 8 steps proposed by Cowie and Jennifer:

1. Create a portrait of the school (its vision, culture, philosophy, values).
2. Identify the nature of the problem through a detailed review of the measures in place and the violence occurring, as well as the motivation level of school staff with regard to committing to collective measures to confront violence in the schools. It is important to fully grasp the nature and frequency of the violence and its negative effects on individuals and on the school environment before launching any initiatives. This preliminary evaluation will enable schools to determine the most pressing needs and choose the most effective methods to reach the goals set by the school, while saving considerable time and energy.
3. Identify the common goals of school employees, since staff solidarity, collaboration, and commitment are listed as critical factors in the successful implementation of a violence prevention program in the school (Debarbieux, 2006; Gottfredson, 2002).
4. Identify the resources (human, material, financial and organizational) available to support planning of the initiatives.
5. Identify potential pitfalls and come up with solutions, i.e. anticipate problems (lack of financial resources, low commitment levels among school staff) and plan how you will deal with them.
6. During the planning process, take into account the evaluations to be carried out before and after the implementation of the measures chosen.
7. In conjunction with adopting new measures, make a plan to publicize the measures and raise the school community's awareness of the new collective initiative to improve the school's social and academic environment.
8. Evaluate the results of the initiative in relation to the objectives. This will enable you to keep measures proven effective, fine-tune those not achieving the desired results and adapt the measures to changing social, family, academic or occupational realities in the school community.

If necessary, the selected measures can be modified to harmonize with any violence prevention measures already in place.

A key factor in the prevention of violence: A clear position known to everyone

According to numerous researchers, certain schools are less susceptible to violence than others. Among the various factors contributing to the prevention of violence in school is the existence of a clear well-publicized policy, student participation in school regulations and student life, the solidarity of teams, partnerships, etc. It is crucial that the entire staff define and state a clear position regarding violence in the school, whether through the development of a school policy or otherwise. However, it is up to the school to decide how this position will be determined.

Schools with the least violence are those that have a clear policy known to students, staff and parents, and this is one of the key elements to consider in designing a local intervention strategy (Smith, 2008). A school policy can be defined as a set of resolutions made by the school collectively in order to prevent and deal with violence. This policy could include aims, objectives, and methods

It is crucial that the entire staff define and state a clear position regarding violence in the school, whether through the development of a school policy or otherwise.

by which the initiative will be implemented (prevention, protection and follow-up) so as to foster harmonious social relationships and manage behaviours which are detrimental to the personal, social, academic and occupational development of members of the school community. Some of the goals pursued could be included in the school success plan and connections could be made between the measures adopted and the Québec Education Program (e.g. the broad area of learning Health and Well-Being) or Complementary Educational Services Programs (e.g. Promotion and Prevention program).

A school policy on the management of violent behaviour is a valuable tool since it: 1) clearly defines what is meant by "violent

behaviour," 2) defines the role of authority within the educational mandate, 3) clarifies how problem behaviours will be managed, and 4) states the support that will be offered to victims, perpetrators, witnesses and parents. In order for such a policy to be effective from the outset, it must also clearly show the commitment of the school to enforce the rights of all, and to provide the best possible environment for personal, social, and academic development for all.

There are many reasons why the development of a school policy is recommended. Whether to define the relationships in the school, take stock of the situation or clarify expectations, such a policy can eliminate the ambiguity which often leads to feelings of frustration, insecurity, anxiety and powerlessness among those involved in violent situations. These policies are also very useful in planning initiatives for preventing violent events, protecting people and providing follow-up, and thus serve as an excellent communication tool that fosters solidarity and cohesion in the school community.

The handful of studies carried out on the subject are for the most part concerned with school policies on bullying. They highlight the importance for all institutions to clearly communicate their intention to counter and reduce bullying in the school. It would appear that there is less bullying behaviour in schools where students are well aware of the rules and consequences in place for managing violent behaviour.

As we have seen, a key factor in the success of violence prevention at school is a tailor-made policy and intervention strategy, and it is the members of the school community (staff, students, parents) who are in the best position to draft a concise document that expresses values everyone will be able to share. The establishment of a school policy for managing behaviour related to violence is certainly an important starting point for future initiatives. However, it should be regularly updated to take into account new social realities (e.g. cyberbullying) related to violence.

It would appear that there is less bullying behaviour in schools where students are well aware of the rules and consequences in place for managing violent behaviour.

VIOLENCE IN THE SCHOOLS:

Let's work
on it together!

Coordination and writing

Claire Beaumont, Ph. D.
Canadian Observatory on School
Violence Prevention
Faculté des sciences de l'éducation
Université Laval

Research and writing

Cynthia Lépine, researcher
Canadian Observatory on School
Violence Prevention
Faculté des sciences de l'éducation
Université Laval

Management and coordination

Richard Leblanc, coordinator
Coordination des services complémentaires
Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir
et du Sport

Danielle Marquis, project manager,
Violence in the schools
Coordination des services complémentaires
Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir
et du Sport

Collaboration

Paula Saint-Arnaud, project manager
Action plan to prevent and deal with
violence in the schools

Raymond Tozzi, project manager
Action plan to prevent and deal with
violence in the schools

Direction des communications
Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir
et du Sport

Graphics and design

Deschamps Design

English translation

Direction de la production
en langue anglaise

Secteur des services à la communauté
anglophone

Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir
et du Sport

For more information

Beaumont, C., and S. Beaulac. "Une action concertée en milieu scolaire pour diminuer les conduites agressives des adolescents à risque." *Vie pédagogique*. Web Site, no. 138 (March 2006). (http://www.viepedagogique.gouv.qc.ca/numeros/138/vp138_Action_concertee.pdf).

Benbenishty, R., and R.A. Astor. *School Violence in Context: Culture, Neighborhood, Family, School and Gender*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

British Columbia. Ministry of Education. *Focus on Bullying: A Prevention Program for Elementary School Communities*. (<http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/specialed/bullying.pdf>).

Cowie, H., and D. Jennifer. *Managing Violence in Schools*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing, 2007.

Debarbieux, É. *Violence à l'école : un défi mondial?* Paris: Armand Collin, 2006.

Fortin, L., and Y. Picard. "Les élèves à risque de décrochage : facteurs discriminants entre décrocheurs et persévérants." *Revue des sciences de l'éducation* 25, no. 2 (1999): 359-374.

Fotinos, G. *Le climat des écoles primaires*. Paris: Mutuelle générale de l'éducation Nationale, 2006.

Gottfredson, D. C. *Schools and Delinquency*. Cambridge: University Press, 2001.

Gottfredson, D. C. *School-Based Crime Prevention*, in L.W. Sherman, D. Gottfredson, D. Mackenzie, J.E.P. Reuter and S. Bushway. *Preventing crime: what works, what doesn't, what's promising*. Report to the United States Congress prepared for the National Institute of Justice, 2002.

Leclerc, D., et al. *Guide de prévention et d'intervention contre la violence envers le personnel de l'éducation*. Montréal: CSQ, 2007. (http://www.csq.qc.net/sites/1676/Guide_Violence.PDF).

Marcotte, D., G. Charlebois, and M. Bélanger. "La dépression en milieu scolaire: un phénomène peu reconnu qui interfère avec la réussite." in L. Deblois. *La réussite scolaire. Comprendre et mieux intervenir*. Québec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2005, 169-172.

Olweus, D. (1993). *Bullying at School: What we know and what we can do*, Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1993.

Québec. Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec. *Complementary Educational Services: Essential for Success*. Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, 2002. (<http://www.mels.gouv.qc.ca/dfgj/csc/pdf/19-7036A.pdf>).

Québec. Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport. *Violence in the schools: Let's work on it together!* Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, 2009.

Québec. Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport. *Violence in the schools: Let's work on it together!* Action plan to prevent and deal with violence. Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, 2008. (<http://www.mels.gouv.qc.ca/violenceEcole>).

Smith, J. D., J. B. Cousins, and R. Stewart. "Antibullying Interventions in Schools: Ingredients of Effective Programs." *Canadian Journal of Education* 28, no. 4 (2005), 739-762.

Smith, P. K., et al. "A content analysis of school anti-bullying policies: progress and limitations." *Educational Psychology in Practice* 24, no.1 (2008), 1-12.

To see samples of school policies:

(http://www.ksde.org/KS_SAFE_SCHOOLS_RESOURCE_CENTER/policysamples.html)