
The violence prevention program Connections, described in this article, represents the culmination of the efforts of several social work faculty to forge a partnership with a local school district to address students' needs to learn and feel safe at school, using known best practices, while simultaneously providing education for social work interns. (Contains 25 references.) (GCP)

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Whole-School Violence Prevention Program: A University–Public School Collaboration

Allen-Meares and Franklin (1998) noted the importance of communities and universities working together to identify and develop needed services for schools. The violence prevention program Connections, described in this article, represents the culmination of the efforts of several social work faculty to forge a partnership with a local school district to address students’ needs to learn and feel safe at school, using known best practices (Hamburg, 1998), while simultaneously providing education for social work interns at two levels of practice: service delivery and program evaluation (Hess & Mullen, 1995). The program began as a cooperative effort between the Southern Connecticut State University (SCSU) and a local school district.

SCSU is a multipurpose, comprehensive, fully accredited university authorized and funded through the Connecticut General Assembly to offer courses and programs leading to bachelor’s and master’s degrees in the arts, sciences, and professional fields, including social work. The university’s mission is to function as a regional institution involved in the economic and social development of the southern part of the state through quality academic offerings, public service efforts, research and grant projects, and cooperative community programs.

Concern for the improvement of education from kindergarten through high school dominates political and media discourse. There is also a renewed concentration on educational outcomes per se. Many states, including Connecticut, have instituted more stringent requirements for school promotion. Consequently, school principals and superintendents are under pressure to conform to and document attainment of the new educational standards for promotion. At the same time, issues of school violence and adolescent substance abuse continue to trouble communities across the country (Fessenden, 2000; Richman & Bowen, 1997).

The goals for the university and the local school systems are similar: to educate their students for personal enrichment and productive membership in society. The university seeks
to be involved with the community to fulfill its mission of providing services to other public institutions, to educate social work students to take on leadership roles in a host of settings by providing training sites, and to contribute to the body of professional knowledge. Community schools need to educate children while addressing the psychosocial stresses that prevent learning and contribute to aggressive behavior. Bertha Capen Reynolds (1975) noted that social workers must meet their clients at the crossroads of their lives. And schools are the universal crossroads for millions of children and adolescents.

Creating safe schools requires a multipronged approach that does not lend itself easily to pure theoretical models. According to Pollack and Sundermann (2001) who reviewed programs aiming to create safer schools, “Isolating individual factors that contribute to safe schools can be a difficult challenge for even the most skilled analyst” (p. 14). Similarly, Dryfoos (1994) in her review of full-service schools, admitted that it is not clear how or how well they work. “Random assignment is not feasible in school settings and finding and maintaining control groups arduous and expensive” (p. 9).

Still, Dryfoos (1994) and Pollack and Sundermann (2001) agreed that some elements of safe and effective schools are known and research is ongoing to fine-tune interventions. There is consensus that essential elements of safe and effective schools include a focus on high academic standards for all students; meaningful family involvement in the schools; positive relationships among students and staff; a respectful attitude toward children and youths; opportunities for students to express their feelings safely; and a system for identifying problems and finding lasting solutions (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention [OJJDP], 1999). Although these goals are clear, the means to achieve them are not. Connections seeks to address the recommendations of the OJJDP:

Program activities involving multiple levels of intensity can be utilized to reduce discipline problems and improve academic results and school. The three levels of support critical to meeting the needs of all students are prevention, early intervention, and intensive intervention. A mix of activities targeting the entire school, students exhibiting troubling behavior patterns, and individual students with more intense needs provides the strongest opportunity for creating a school-wide climate of respect, marked by positive interactions and minimal behavioral disruptions. (p. 3)

Social problems identified as risk factors for violent behavior among school children, such as poverty, single-parent households, and the need for both parents to work, even when both are present in the home, have become more acute in the past decades (Richman, Rosenfeld, & Bowen, 1998). Thus, there is a greater interest in partnerships between schools and communities to provide programs for youths’ psychosocial development (Allen-Meares & Franklin, 1998; Dryfoos, 1994; Franklin & Streeter, 1998; Hare, 1994). Schools are a natural, nonstigmatizing point of entry for services to children and their families. Social workers operating on-site at schools have the opportunity to
develop preventive services for the students, to provide primary inter-
ventions, and to influence the environ-
ment of the school itself in ways seldom equaled in other settings
(González-Ramos, 1990).

Establishing the Connections Program

Four key factors contributed to establishment of Connections: (1) two
SCSU social work faculty members’ desire to develop a model of service
delivery in schools predicated on their years of substantive experience in
school-based social work; (2) the school district superintendent’s en-
thusiasm and financial support as well as the middle school principal’s co-
operation; (3) grants from private foundations, augmented by univer-
sity and department monies, that support the on-site social work supervi-
sor; and (4) the availability of social work interns and the university’s
mandate to train social work students in school-based practice and program
evaluation.

The on-site presence of an experienced, clinical school social worker is
key to the program’s success. Under careful supervision of the social
worker, interns become integral members of the school community through
frequent contact with teachers, other school personnel, and the students
themselves. The interns develop essential interprofessional collaborative
skills, allowing them to perform their vital function in a host setting. The
interns are taught cognitive–behavioral interventions, which include
training in life social skills education as well as other vital group work skills.
The interns are closely monitored in their counseling responsibilities both
individually and in weekly group supervision. Thus they learn profes-

sional skills necessary to implement best practices in schools and, in turn,
are a resource to the schools and the students.

Program Description

The Connections program is predi-
cated on program elements currently
known to support students in their
efforts to learn in a safe environment.
The approach uses social skills train-
ing for all students not only to im-
prove their social functioning, but also to improve their social network.
Chapman (2000) reported that “ado-
lescents may be experiencing an im-
poverished social network in many
life domains” (p. 41). Positive peer
relations are linked to pro-social
behavior.

A unit of six social work interns is
assigned to the school; each intern
takes responsibility for a specific grade
level team in the middle school. In
the initial phase of the program, ev-
ery student in the school fills out an
autobiographical survey during the
first two weeks of school. The survey
asks questions to determine whether
the student has experienced any of
the identified risk factors of school
failure or poor social adjustment
(Fraser, Richman, & Galinsky, 1999).
In addition, the students are asked if
they would like to meet with the so-
cial work intern assigned to their edu-
cational team. The interns, with the
assistance of the clinical supervisor,
then decide which students to see first,
with the goal of seeing all students on
their team individually during the first
two marking periods.

Next, the interns conduct individual
interviews. Concurrently, teachers,
administrators, and other school per-
sonnel refer students who exhibit
problematic behavior such as truancy,
fighting, or depressive symptoms to
the interns. Because the interns become integral members of the school community through their participation in team and classroom meetings, students feel comfortable going directly to them to seek assistance. After the initial interviews, the interns determine the students’ service needs—for example, tutoring, outside referral, assignment to a particular group, parental involvement, or ongoing counseling in the school setting.

The interns then offer life skills training groups for all students, usually in the context of the health curriculum. Life skills training has been proven to forestall the use of alcohol and other harmful substances as well the commencement of sexual activity (Botvin, Baker, Dusenbury, Botvin, & Diaz, 1995). Another documented outcome of life skills training is the development of positive social support, a reduction in incidents of violence, and an increase in positive interethnic relations (Freeman, Franklin, Fong, Shaffer, & Timberlake, 1998; Howe, 1999). When life skills training is implemented at the middle school age, the effects are still traceable during participants’ senior year in high school (Botvin et al.). The focus of these groups is to reinforce the students with strong normative values and behaviors and to lead the swayable middle group toward pro-social decision making. Although such groups do not help students who already are engaging in serious high-risk behaviors, it does allow the interns to identify the students who need more intensive intervention (Schinke & Gilchrist, 1984).

The foregoing essential program elements are in the third year of implementation. Two other crucial elements of the Connections violence prevention agenda—after-school programs and active parental involvement in the school—have recently been funded and are in their first year of implementation. Connections aims to provide after-school programs for tutoring, homework assistance, artistic and athletic enrichment, as well as supervised socialization. The Carnegie Report, *A Matter of Time* (1992), stated that a crucial component of keeping students safe and out of trouble is keeping them supervised and productively engaged between the hours of 3 p.m. and 6 p.m., which are the least monitored hours of adolescents’ lives. Law enforcement professionals believe that providing after-school programs is one of the most effective strategies for reducing youth violence.

Parental involvement is seen as vital to schoolchildren’s success. Parents are informed about Connections through a letter mailed to their homes. The letter includes a consent form to allow their children to participate. “School-family partnerships” are viewed as an essential ingredient in the web of social supports for children (Bowen, 1999). According to Fordham and Ogba (1986), it is difficult for children to succeed in an institution from which their parents feel alienated. Connections seeks to integrate parents more fully into the life of the school by administering needs assessments. On the basis of the assessments, Connections has funding to offer programs for parents, for example, GED classes, access to health services, and workshops on conflict management skills and on how to help children cope with the new political realities.

**Case Vignettes**

The following case examples illustrate how an intervention was
possible because of the program's structure, which incorporates both formal and informal contact between interns and students.

Case 1

While walking in the corridor where her seventh-grade team had the majority of its classes, the intern saw a note on the hall floor. She picked it up and was alarmed to read its contents. The writer was attempting to comfort her friend who talked about suicide. The note was signed with a first name only. Concerned, the intern was determined to find the identity of the writer and her troubled friend. Because the note was found in the area in which the seventh-grade classes are located, the intern obtained a list of all seventh graders and found only two girls with the same first name as the writer. She tracked down both girls and found the writer of the note, who then revealed her friend's name. The intern sought out the suicidal student who admitted that she was upset about many issues. After some intense counseling during which the girl signed a contract not to do herself harm, the intern accompanied the girl to the school social worker. The parents were called and a referral was made for outside evaluation and therapy. The intern monitored the situation in the school, poised to intervene should the need arise. This prevention-intervention was made possible only by the intern's intimate knowledge of the school environment, grade level organization, and the school's computer system.

Case 2

In the fall the interns administered the autobiographies. While reading the ones from his team, an intern was struck by a girl's reaction to the events of September 11. She reported symptoms of anxiety, sleep disturbance, and a feeling that Osama bin Laden was in her house. The intern immediately saw the student. His assessment was that, although she was having a severe reaction to the tragedy she did have a strong support system at home. With the student's consent, the intern called her parents in for a meeting. The parents were grateful; they had been unaware of the daughter's anxieties. (During this meeting it emerged that the father was a firefighter, thus offering a possible explanation for the student's reaction.) Together the intern, the parents, and the student developed a plan of action. The girl told the intern that several other students were severely upset by the events of September 11. With the cooperation of the school administration, the intern now meets weekly with this group of students. This process was made possible because the intern, through the Connections program, had created a safety net of social support and early detection. The issues could be dealt with before there were any major behavioral indicators at home or in school.

Conclusion

New initiatives should include an evaluation component to assess the service's effectiveness in relation to its goals (Martin & Kettner, 1996). However, new programs need time to become established before summative evaluations can be done. Although Gomby and Larson (1992) emphasized the importance of the evaluation of school-linked services, they recommend not measuring outcomes in the first few years while the program is being established. There is little guidance as to how much time
should elapse from service inception to evaluation. Many constraints (political, financial, people power) dictate premature analysis (Paglia & Room, 1999).

For three years we collected a variety of data related to student characteristics, program intervention techniques, and frequency of violent behavior. After the fourth year we will conduct a summative evaluation to comply with the demands of the university and other funding sources. In addition to collecting data on incidents of violence, we will analyze behavioral indicators such as rates of truancy, school promotion and retention, and several other risk factors that are known to be associated with violence in schools (Richman & Bowen, 1997). Rates of promotion and retention will be included as one way to address the critics who argue that schools will lose their academic thrust if the school focus is diluted by providing social support programs.

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