

APPENDIX B

Report on School Safety Survey of May 26, 1998

REPORT ON SCHOOL SAFETY SURVEY OF MAY 26, 1998
Prepared for the Senate Interim Committee on Education
July 6, 1998

by
the Texas Center for Educational Research
Austin, Texas

On May 26, 1998, the Senate Interim Committee on Education requested information from state agencies, education organizations, regional education service centers, and individuals about school safety and suggestions for legislative action. The Committee received responses from 21 entities. The respondents included 13 regional education service centers, three school districts (one of which combined its response with the education service center), Advocacy Incorporated, Texas Classroom Teacher Association, Texas Counseling Association, Texas Education Agency, Texas Congress of Parents and Teachers, and Texas State Teachers Association.

Are schools less safe today than ten years ago?

Eleven respondents said “yes” and ten said “no.”

Of the regional education service centers, five responded “yes” and eight responded “no.”

Of the professional and membership organizations, three responded “yes” and two responded “no.”

Responding school districts said “yes.”

Respondents were asked to outline the specific reasons for their responses. Several responses were common among respondents who answered “yes.” They noted the increase in drug and substance use and abuse (5), and more exposure to violent media in entertainment and news (6). Other frequent responses were increased gang activity (4), home and family issues (4), vandalism against the school and school staff (4), more volatile students and parents (3), and moral decay in society (3). Additional comments were mentioned once or twice: buildings that are less secure, increased suicides, more suspensions, a lenient juvenile justice system, lack of counselors, lack of respect for authority, frequent assaults, greater tolerance of aggression, more special education students, and more students with psychological problems.

The most common answer among the respondents who answered “no” was that Chapter 37 had done much to improve the safety of schools (9). Respondents specifically mentioned Juvenile Justice Alternative Education Programs, Alternative Education Programs, teacher ability to remove violent and disruptive pupils, and better coordination between schools and local law enforcement agencies (4) as reasons for safer schools. Additional comments mentioned once or twice were greater awareness by school personnel of the problems, improved school facilities, implementation of violence prevention programs and conflict resolution, better training of school personnel, more frequent use of security personnel, and better preparation of educators for crisis situations. One respondent commented that the media coverage makes school violence seem more prevalent than it is and that schools are, in fact, more safe rather than less.

Are schools less safe today than five years ago?

Nine respondents said “yes” and nine said “no.” Three respondents did not answer the question.

Of the regional education service centers, five responded “yes” and seven responded “no.”

Of the professional and membership organizations, one “yes,” one responded “no,” and three did not respond to the question.

Responding school districts said “yes.”

Respondents were asked to outline the specific reasons for their responses. Seven respondents who answered “yes” noted that the reasons were the same as for five years previous (i.e., ten years ago). Two respondents who provided reasons commented on increased drugs, gangs, and student violence. Parents prone to violence was another reason provided. Within the context of the question, one respondent noted that the reason schools were less safe related to the need for tougher laws and more training, counselors, after-school programs, money to implement Chapter 37 provisions, and flexibility in disciplining special education students. Respondents who answered “no” (8) reported that the reasons were the same as for five years previous (i.e., ten years ago). One respondent who answered “no” commented that the problems themselves have changed over time but did not elaborate on what that meant.

What suggestions for legislative action by the State of Texas do you have that might assist school districts in addressing the issue of school safety?

Suggestions from respondents who answered that schools are less safe than five years ago (9) focused on two topics: the need for tougher laws and tougher law enforcement and the need for the state to encourage or to require more parent involvement and parent training. Several additional ideas were offered:

- penalizing those who create or distribute violence in the media,
- providing more flexibility for schools to address serious disruptive behavior,
- more changes in the special education laws (e.g., more flexibility to remove or expel a violent or disruptive special education student),
- mandated site-based decision making
- expanded funding and responsibilities for counselors, and
- diagnostic testing to determine which students may have a profile indicating a tendency to aggression and misbehavior.

Suggestions from respondents who answered that schools are less safe than five years ago (9) did not have a predominant theme or focus. Their suggestions varied:

- state grants for innovative programs to promote school safety,
- tougher laws and law enforcement,
- more training,
- a new state initiative related to “building good citizens,”
- more funding for counselors, and
- more flexibility for educators in implementing existing laws and rules.

Respondents made numerous suggestions that would require additional state and local resources or reallocation of existing resources. Several respondents recommended

- schools receive funding for security (training, personnel, programs) and
- more funding for training (e.g., crisis prevention, peer mediation, conflict resolution)

Additional suggestions requiring resources include

- providing school district police departments
- expanding the Alternative Education Programs and Juvenile Justice Alternative Education Programs
- funding for partnerships for controlling violence
- grant programs to support innovative safe schools programs
- a state citizenship initiative
- more counselors

- more teachers for the Alternative Education programs
- more prevention programs
- improved facilities (lighting, controlled access, etc.)
- use of school facilities after hours
- more social services provided through the schools
- funding to prosecute individuals who assault teachers
- after-school activities
- required attendance at drug and alcohol prevention classes by students who violate policies on substance abuse
- weekend activities
- an elementary counselor grant program

One respondent cited the Ysleta Cesar Chavez Academy as a model that other districts could replicate. Another commented that Head Start and preschool should be coordinated. The DARE program was mentioned by one respondent as a safety program that should be expanded.

Summary

Respondents are about evenly split on whether the schools of today are less safe than they were five or ten years ago. Those who find schools less safe cited gangs, substance abuse, violence portrayed in the media, and lack of connection to and respect for authority by students in their homes and in school as primary reasons for concern. They did not mention school organization, curriculum, testing, or other matters related to the central mission of schools. Respondents who do not find schools less safe than they were five or ten years ago cite Chapter 37 of the Texas Education Code, enacted in 1995, as a reason for the change. While their responses do not necessarily paint a picture of uniformly safe and secure schools, they note that educators and administrators are more aware of safety concerns, have better training, and have flexibility to deal appropriately with problems as they arise. Suggestions for legislation include having tougher laws and tougher law enforcement and more required parent involvement. Respondents made numerous suggestions for more personnel, programs, and requirements that call for additional or reallocated resources. These include funding for additional security personnel and equipment; more funding for training for educators, staff, and students; and expansion of promising programs such as Alternative Education Programs, DARE, and specialized academies for students likely to have serious disciplinary problems.

