

## **Purpose of the Evaluation**

The purpose of this formative evaluation is to describe the PeaceBuilders® rollout at Maryland Avenue Elementary School. How are staff implementing the program, and with what degree of consistency? Is the current implementation style consistent with what the PeaceBuilders developers intended? Are there barriers preventing implementation and, if so, what is their nature?

The study is formative in nature, designed to help administrators determine what next-steps decisions or actions are warranted (e.g., ongoing teacher training) to improve program operations (Scriven, as cited in Russ-Eft & Preskill, 2001). More specifically, the evaluator will be guided by an implementation framework, following steps/procedures advocated by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) (2001).

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## **Review of Relevant Literature**

The evaluator conducted a comprehensive review of the literature, which follows here. It is organized around four themes:

- the current state of youth violence.
- the role of youth violence prevention and intervention programs.
- evaluations of the PeaceBuilders program
- characteristics of an implementation evaluation

For the purposes of this review, violence is defined as an act of aggravated assault, rape, robbery, and homicide.

### **The Problem of Youth Violence**

Between 1983 and 1993, violent crimes among youths reached record proportions, marking a seeming epidemic. Since 1994, however, there has been a decline in three main indicators of violent behavior: arrest records, victim data, and emergency room records. In addition, the use of firearms has declined, and there has been a corresponding drop in homicide arrests. In fact, by 1999, all violent crime arrests fell below the 1983 levels, with the exception of aggravated assault (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services [USDHHS], 2001).

These hopeful indicators do not tell a complete story, however; the research is far more mixed when crime types are disaggregated. While violent crimes did decrease between 1983 and 1999, aggravated assault actually increased by 70% (USDHHS, 2001). Snyder (as cited in Flannery, et al., 2003) points to the fluctuating rates of young people who self-report committing violence, a critical information source that cannot be ignored. As important, while Snyder suggests a recent decline in the number of students who carry weapons to school, he also notes increase in the number of children involved in nonfatal violent activities (verbal bullying, for example). Researchers also do not agree on the role gangs play. According to USDHHS (2001), the number of school campuses infected by the presence of gangs continued to rise well after 1994 with slow but consistent declines beginning in 1999; however, other data

indicate that the number of children involved in gangs has not decreased at all since as spike or peak in 1996.

Contrary to popular belief, youth violence is not only a problem in economically disadvantaged communities. While male adolescents from minority groups have a notably higher arrest rate for violent crimes, self-report data reveals that the difference between violence perpetrated by females and members of majority groups and minority males may be much smaller than we thought (USDHHS, 2001). As one principal commented, “Good clothes cover a lot of problems” (as cited in Embry, 1997). Thus, youth violence is a problem that should be of interest to everyone.

### **The Role of Youth Violence Prevention and Intervention Programs**

During the 1970s, many believed that youth violence was untreatable, and that prevention and intervention programs could not positively impact the problem (USDHHS, 2001). But research conducted over the past 15 years suggest that some school interventions are, in fact, effective—positively impacting both behavior and academic performance. Gottfredson (as cited in Embry, 1997) notes the positive and lasting impact that effective school interventions can have on behavior *and* academics.

One reaction to the youth violence epidemic of the 80s was the development of hundreds of prevention and intervention programs. Unfortunately, Wahler, Fetsch, and Silliman (1997) report that there has been little rigorous scientific evaluation of such programs. And according to Mendel (as cited in USDHHS, 2001), evaluations that have been conducted reveal that much of the money the United States spends on youth violence prevention and intervention is being directed to programs that are ineffective and, at times, harmful.

Today social scientists know much more about policies and procedures that can reduce youth violence than they did in the past. Recently researchers have been able to identify the characteristics of effective programs and they have evaluated existing programs with established criteria. The good news is that promising programs do exist. There are indeed programs with solid scientific rationales and empirical support of their efficacy, while “others seem to stand primarily on the strength of good intentions and three-color graphics” (Wahler et al., 1997).

Information about effective youth violence programs has not always made it into the hands of our public schools. Mendel (as cited in USDHHS, 2001) believes that youth violence rates would decrease significantly if only schools and other relevant agencies reallocated the money they currently spend on ineffective programs to those programs whose efficacy has been scientifically supported.

Fortunately, some researchers have made recent efforts to inform the public about effective and ineffective youth violence programs. Both the Surgeon General (USDHHS, 2001) and the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control (1997), have released reports based on scientific studies that assess the efficacy of various youth violence prevention and intervention programs. This body of research is still limited, however. A summary of reports that cite PeaceBuilders as an effective youth violence prevention program follows.

## Evaluations of PeaceBuilders

### *The Tucson evaluations*

PeaceBuilders has been limitedly evaluated over the past seven years. Researchers conducted several studies among the same nine elementary schools in Tucson, Arizona, but the research or evaluative focus tended to vary. Each of these studies is described below.

In their 2003 article, Flannery et al. detail their evaluation of the use of the PeaceBuilders program among more than 4,000 students in eight matched elementary schools in the Tucson area. The researchers conducted the evaluation between 1994 and 1996. The schools were randomly assigned to either an immediate PeaceBuilders intervention (PBI), or a delayed intervention (PBD). The delayed intervention began one year after the immediate intervention. The researchers hypothesized that would decrease aggression and increase social competence among the children who participated. The results were as follows:

After the first year of the study,

- grade K-2 students from the PBI group were rated significantly higher by their teachers in the area of social competence than were students in the control group.
- students who were initially rated by teachers as most aggressive (based on indicators including hitting, kicking, and verbal abuse) benefited the most from the PeaceBuilders program.
- grade K-5 students from the PBI group self-reported more prosocial behaviors than the students in the control group.
- grade 3-5 students in the PBI group demonstrated a decrease in aggressive behavior that students in the control group did not.

After the second year of the study,

- researchers noted differential effects for aggression and prosocial behavior between the PBI and the PBD groups.
- effects for the PBI group were maintained or increased during the second year of implementation.

Flannery et al. discuss the obstacles they faced in conducting this type of evaluation. First, they note that large-scale intervention studies are subject to attrition when teachers or students drop out of the program. Second, they were unable to control students' exposure to other programs that might affect the study's results. Third, it proved difficult to deny or delay interventions to schools that were in need of immediate help.

This study also examined program implementation. The researchers provide some evidence that the program was implemented by teachers as the program developers intended, and that teachers were satisfied with their training and program materials. More than 90% of the teachers reported that the PeaceBuilders philosophy was easy to understand, and 80% believed the program would be easy to implement. The report emphasizes the importance of teacher buy-in and the ease of implementation in PeaceBuilders success: "Few violence prevention programs systematically focus on the importance of staff training or on assessing the fidelity of program implementation" (Flannery & Seaman, as cited in Flannery et al., 2003).

A separate study, conducted by Krug, Brener, Dahlberg, Ryan, & Powell (1997) with the same nine Tucson schools, examined the impact of PeaceBuilders on student visits to the school nurse for all reasons, all injuries, and fight-related injuries. The results showed that between 1993 and 1995 (the years of the study), the rate of visits to the nurse decreased by 12.6% in treatment schools and remained constant in control schools.

Embry, Flannery, Vazsonyi, Powell, & Atha (1996) targeted schools in the Tucson Unified and Sunnyside School Districts. Four schools began PeaceBuilders in the 1993-1994 school year and four began in the 1994-1995 school year. Data collection tools included student self-reports, playground observations, standardized teacher reports and ratings, and school behavior records. This report details the collection of baseline data, but does not include outcome results, as it seems the evaluation was in progress at the time of publication. The outcome results were not published until 2003, in a report by Flannery et al., which is described at the beginning of this section.

The Injury Control Update of Fall 1997, published by the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control (NCIPC), underlines the importance of empirical/scientific-based methods to critically evaluate youth violence prevention programs. NCIPC, a division of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), provided funding for such an evaluation of PeaceBuilders. That study, conducted by Flannery, showed promising results: When PeaceBuilders was implemented in nine Tucson, Arizona schools for three to five months, the schools demonstrated a 10% decrease in fight-related injuries. At control schools, the rate of fight-related injuries increased by 56%. Unfortunately, this report did not cite the year of Flannery's study, nor did it detail his data collection procedures.

### *Small-scale evaluations*

Evaluators have conducted several small-scale PeaceBuilders studies at other schools. Embry (in NCIPC, 1997) cites the example of a San Bernardino, California school in which 120 students were suspended and 30 had been arrested. After two years of implementation, these numbers dropped to five and zero, respectively. The significance of these figures is of limited value, however, since Embry does not give the size of the total student population. He also fails to mention the reasons for suspension, which could include non-violent offenses.

Vosskuhler and Issman (2002) describe the impact of PeaceBuilders on a racially diverse, economically disadvantaged school in Bronx, New York. Issman, the school principal, brought PeaceBuilders to Garret A. Morgan Elementary in hopes of improving test scores: prior to implementation only 16% of the students were meeting or exceeding academic standards. Issman believed the scientific premise that a safe environment decreases demands on the frontal cerebral cortex, the portion of the brain responsible for the fight or flight response, thus increasing the brain resources available for learning. After two years of implementation, the number of students meeting academic standards rose to 30%. This report does not mention what, if any, curricular reforms were also put in place during the study's time frame.

Elliot (1998) details the implementation of PeaceBuilders at Jesse G. Sanchez School in the Alisal Union School District of Salinas, California. Sanchez School is in a low socioeconomic area, and 80% of its students have limited English proficiency. In

addition, many students are the children of migrant workers, and miss significant amounts of school when their families travel to harvest crops. The city of Salinas had been plagued by gang rivalry, shootings, and a high rate of school violence. However, after one year of PeaceBuilders implementation, the district's schools demonstrated the following reductions in negative behavior:

- Disciplinary action by 49%
- Episodes of serious violence by 59%
- Tardiness by 20%
- Absences by 31%
- Vandalism incidents and costs by 61%

Elliot underscores the high level of community involvement in the implementation of PeaceBuilders, with Salinas businesses, libraries, youth agencies, law enforcement, health care providers, and families providing support for the program. In 1996, President Clinton visited Salinas to praise their crime fighting efforts and outreach to children.

### **Implementation Evaluation**

According to NWREL (2001), an implementation evaluation framework is ideal when a school chooses a comprehensive new program. The data of an implementation evaluation feeds back into the program to effect improvement, thus an implementation evaluation is formative.

NWREL warns that a program, despite its quality, cannot be effective if staff do not implement it as the program developers envisioned. Likewise, efficacy is compromised if staff members overlook key elements of the program. Therefore, systematic data collection is essential. Systematic data collection can reveal, "which program components are firmly in place and which ones are only being given lip service" (n.p.). In this way, an implementation evaluation serves to inform stakeholders about the state of implementation and to uncover any barriers to implementation. Then recommendations can be made as to how such obstacles can be mitigated.

NWREL (2001) believes that for effective implementation to occur, the following conditions should be met:

- Implementation is undertaken for the substantiated reasons (solve a problem vs. advance a career) Administration supports the program
- Adequate resources are available, especially time for teachers to program nuances
- Professional development is ongoing
- Teachers collaborate in implementing the program
- Teachers resistance to change are diplomatically pressured
- Administrators allow staff to making mistakes as they learn
- Parents and community are involved
- Conflict with other programs is minimized
- Successful innovations are incorporated into district policy and budgets so that they will outlast changes in leadership and funding

An implementation evaluation may examine whether these conditions are being met.