School/Classroom Environment

Schools offer prevention specialists regular access to students throughout their developmental years and may offer the only consistent access to the most crime-prone youths during their early school years (Gottfredson 1998). A school that implements and maintains an effective program may improve overall school climate and in so doing have a positive effect on youth behavior both during and after school hours. The lack of positive feelings for and identification with one's school has been shown to be directly related to juvenile delinquency. For example, in a study of the predictors of in-school substance use among high school students, Voelkl and Frone (2000) found that students' lack of identification with school was significantly related to both in-school alcohol and marijuana use.

According to Gottfredson (1998), programs aimed at clarifying and communicating norms about behaviors are effective ways to reduce crime, delinquency, and substance abuse. Prevention programs directed at positively altering the school and classroom environment seek to reduce or eliminate problem behaviors by changing the overall context in which they occur. These strategies may include interventions to 1) change the decision-making processes or authority structures (building school capacity); 2) redefine norms for behavior and signal appropriate behavior through the use of rules (setting norms for behavior); 3) provide greater flexibility in instruction (classroom organization); 4) implement the use of rewards and punishments and the reduction of down time (classroom management); and 5) reorganize classes or grades to create smaller units, continuing interaction, and different mixes of students. Programs that have the capacity to build students' attachment to their school are often highlighted as models for prevention.

Theoretical Foundation

Prevention programs aimed at improving the school or classroom environment are closely linked to social organization theory, because they have a holistic approach, working from the premise that all aspects of school life can affect violence and substance abuse (Sherman et al. 1998). Gottfredson (1998) identifies such programs, which are "aimed at clarifying and communicating norms and behaviors," as effective prevention approaches. Several of these practices that were shown effective (in at least one study, or include components that have been found successful) were directly related to school or classroom environment strategies:

- "Schools within schools" programs, such as Student Training Through Urban Strategies (STATUS). These programs, which group students into smaller units for more supportive interaction or flexibility in instruction, have reduced drug abuse and delinquency.

- Training or coaching in "thinking" skills for high-risk youths, using behavior modification techniques or rewards and punishments. This program can reduce delinquency and can reduce substance abuse.

- Building school capacity to initiate and sustain innovation through the use of school teams or other organizational development strategies succeeded in reducing delinquency and substance abuse in one study.

- Improved classroom management and instructional techniques reduced alcohol use in one study. (Gottfredson 1998)

School Organization Interventions

School organization interventions use a comprehensive and systematic approach to juvenile delinquency prevention through changing or improving the way that schools operate (Catalano, Loeber, and McKinney 1999). School organization approaches can involve a wide variety of interventions, including replacing school administrators, reorganizing teachers, and engaging parents in the planning and implementation of school policies and programs (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention 1998).

Schools in urban, poor, disorganized communities are believed to experience more disorder than other schools. Although it is impractical to suggest that schools can reverse the level of problems within their community, they can influence their own in-school rates of disturbances or disruptions (Gottfredson and Gottfredson 1985). For instance, Gottfredson and Gottfredson (1985) say that when controlling for the relevant characteristics of the larger community, characteristics of schools and the way they are run explain significant amounts of variation in school rates of disorderly behavior. Research also suggests that changing the school environment to a more positive climate (where nurturing, inclusiveness, and a feeling of community occur) is associated with a reduction in the levels of violent behavior in the school.

In addition, an Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) Study Group found that several such programs appear to reduce risk factors (including academic failure, dropping out of school, and rebelliousness) and increase protective factors (such as commitment to school and good attendance) (OJJDP 1999). There is emerging evidence that some research-based models of school reform, which provide clear guidance on specific changes that schools and classrooms must make, can result in significant improvement in achievement outcomes for schools with large numbers of students placed at risk of educational failure (U.S. Department of Education 1998). Other risk factors may also include academic failure, dropping out of school, and rebelliousness. School organization intervention programs seek to counteract these risk factors by enhancing protective factors such as a commitment to school and good attendance.

Classroom Organization, Management, and Instructional Activities

The most common school-based prevention strategy is instruction (Gottfredson 1998). Many consider instructional approaches that combine social and thinking skills to be effective in enhancing students' abilities, attitudes, and behaviors inconsistent with substance abuse and other kinds of delinquent behavior (Northeast Center for the Application of Prevention Technologies 1999). Further, interventions involving classroom organization, management, and instructional strategies attempt to promote the protective factors that promote opportunities for active participation in learning, skills to establish positive social relationships, and bonding to school and prosocial peers. In contrast, the risk

factors generally addressed by these programs are obstacles such as academic failure, low commitment to school, and early and persistent antisocial behavior.

It is believed that prevention programs should teach a variety of general life skills for helping adolescents deal with the challenges of adolescent life (Midwest Regional Center for Drug-Free Schools and Communities 1994). Accordingly, certain skills have emerged as critical to preventing and reducing substance abuse and violent behavior, including communication, assertiveness, media resistance, resistance training, social problem-solving, character/belief development, empathy and perspective taking, stress management and coping, and anger management or impulse control (Northeast Center for the Application of Prevention Technologies 1999). School and classroom environment programs seek to address these needs as they enhance educational skills from within the classroom environment.

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