



Becoming a ‘Power School’: Ten Ways to Reduce Violence

‘Power schools’ are schools that achieve excellence by first recognizing that the goals of reducing student violence and increasing academic performance actually complement one another. Initiatives intended to support either improved behavior or student learning usually advance both. In particular, power schools:

1. *Set a primary focus on student academic excellence.* Because classroom teachers are under a great deal of pressure to raise student learning standards, they may resist ambitious new programs that require them to commit valuable time to help in reducing school violence. Power schools are able to demonstrate to staff, however, that quality anti-violence programming can actually *increase* available teaching time by:
 - reducing the number of behavioral disruptions,
 - giving teachers consistent, enforceable standards to impose when students do misbehave, and
 - giving administrators the tools to identify students with high behavioral needs and to commit additional resources to address those needs.
2. *Provide help at an early stage to students with academic problems.* There is a strong relationship between academic failure and student misbehavior. Unsuccessful students often find schools to be unwelcoming places. Indeed, a 1998 report by the U.S. Justice Department states that students who struggle academically and fail to build an emotional attachment to schools and teachers are at significantly greater risk than typical peers for gang membership and other delinquent behaviors.

Schools that single out struggling students for extra academic support before their problems become severe have an increased chance of improving these students’ skills and keeping them invested in school.
3. *Create a common school- or district-wide definition of ‘violence’.* Before a school or district can effectively mobilize to combat student violence, stakeholders must agree on a shared definition of ‘violence.’ Power schools find that a definition of violence is most useful if it is sufficiently broad to cover verbal and physical acts that, intentionally or unintentionally, cause harm, hurt, or embarrassment to another.

4. *Assess the current level of school-related violence in their building or district.* Rates of violence vary dramatically across districts and even between individual schools within a single school district. Therefore, while school violence has become a hot topic in the national media, it is best viewed as a *local* problem. Schools will not be able to plan anti-violence measures until they understand the magnitude of the problem in their own buildings. Power schools survey staff, parents, and students about issues of school violence and personal safety. They may also track other important—if less direct—indicators of student behaviors and satisfaction with school, including:
 - attendance and tardiness rates,
 - number and types of office disciplinary referrals, and
 - in-school /out-of-school suspension rates.

5. *Cultivate knowledge of innovative programs and services to address school violence.* Companies and non-profit organizations are marketing a great many programs and products to school that are purported to combat violence. With so many choices in the marketplace, educators may find it a real challenge to differentiate quality products from those that are not effective. Power schools:
 - consult reputable ‘clearing house’ organizations or research journals to determine what programs or products have the greatest impact in reducing violence, and
 - visit anti-violence programs being run in other schools or districts, to find out what impact a specific program is having on school violence and what roadblocks or problems were encountered as the program was being put into place.

6. *Match new programs to demonstrated local needs, and monitor the effectiveness of these programs over time.* Power schools do not bring in new programs simply because they are trendy but instead carefully match anti-violence programs to their existing needs. A school, for example, that wishes to reduce bullying in schools would not select a conflict mediation program to accomplish this goal, as conflict mediation has not been shown to be effective against chronic bullying. Since every anti-violence program exacts a cost (in staff time, materials, training, and / or other areas), effective schools monitor these programs over time to make sure that the programs are actually *delivering* expected improvements in the school’s behavioral climate.

7. *Hold students and staff to a common set of behavioral standards.* Behavioral expectations for students and staff should be reduced to a small set of easily remembered rules. Power schools phrase these rules in positive terms (e.g., “Students and staff speak respectfully to one another, using appropriate language.” rather than “Do not speak in a loud voice or use profanity when speaking to others”). Rules are posted widely throughout the school and on busses, are reviewed at school staff meetings, and are shared with parents.

8. *Provide swift, consistent consequences for student misbehavior.* Power schools recognize positive behaviors by granting students privileges, specific praise, and opportunities to be recognized for their hard work and civility. Negative behaviors also result in prompt, consistent consequences that take into account both the severity of the student infraction and the number of times that the student has had behavioral problems in the past. 'Consequences' for negative behaviors are not intended to be punitive but to provide the child with any support that they may need and to teach the student that misbehavior comes at a cost.
9. *Allocate increasingly focused interventions and staff attention on students with more chronic behavioral problems.* Principals commonly observe that a relatively small number of students in their schools account for a disproportionately large number of disciplinary office referrals. Power schools keep track of student behavioral performance and provide increasingly structured, intensive interventions for students whose classroom conduct has not improved with less intensive consequences. (One good idea is for schools to draft a uniform series of 'graded consequences' that teachers and administrators can match to student infractions. For example, a single episode of a student's talking back to a teacher may result in the teacher calling the student's parent. If the student chronically talks back, though, they may be enrolled in an in-school skill-building group to practice more appropriate ways to respond to adult requests.)
10. *Foster relationships with law enforcement, outside clinicians, and community agencies.* Not all student misbehavior can be addressed solely within the confines of a school. Power schools find their relationships with law enforcement to be useful (e.g., making it easier for a teacher to communicate with a probation officer for students in the PINS program or on probation). For students with psychiatric disorders or other medical issues that can influence behavior, schools work to maintain close contacts with physicians and other clinicians in the community. (Through regular behavioral progress reports from a child's classroom teacher, for example, a physician may be able to adjust a student's dosage of psychostimulant medication to improve the child's ability to attend to classroom instruction.) Also, schools that know the full range of counseling and other therapeutic services offered by community agencies and organizations can make valuable recommendations to parents about what services would best address needs of their child.