

VIRTUS® Phase II: Managing the Risk of Violence in Schools

National Catholic's VIRTUS® programs are designed to strengthen communities through awareness, education and training.

Did you ever give your elementary-school-age daughter a hug and kiss in the morning, send her skipping down the sidewalk toward school, and then wonder whether she made it safely to her classroom? Ever hear about a teenage girl who was abducted in a school parking lot, and wonder whether the same thing could happen to your child? Or hear about an adolescent boy who was beaten and abused by fellow athletes as a rite of passage on an athletic team, and wonder if your son could become such a victim, or abuser?

At one time or another, many of us face these types of questions. Our children are precious to us, and we want so much to keep them healthy and safe. Yet, persistent teasing, humiliation, bullying, intimidation, fighting, aggression against teachers, forceful sexual harassment, and suicide have been a part of society and schools for many years. These are the kinds of behaviors we tend not to think about, unless *our* child is the victim. And with the rash of recent rage-filled Columbine-like massacres, many of us worry daily about the safety of our children.

National Catholic believes it is imperative that we work toward solutions that help instill a greater sense of security for our young people—so they can focus on living and growing inside healthy relationships while learning the skills they'll need to lead positive and productive lives in our rapidly changing world. VIRTUS® Phase II: *Managing the Risk of Violence in Schools* is designed to tackle these traumatic issues. Michael Bemis, President and Chief Executive Officer of National Catholic, said the Phase II strategy is still being developed. But, he said, it will include the involvement and support of diocesan and religious institutions, superintendents of schools, and

organizations like the National Catholic Education Association (NCEA). And, Bemis said, the program components will likely resemble and draw from our experiences in implementing VIRTUS® Phase I: *Protecting God's Children™*.

"We will develop products, conduct seminars, provide consultation and do online training," said Philip J. Lazarus, Ph.D., Associate Professor and Director of The School Psychology

Training Program at Florida International University, Chairperson of the National Emergency Assistance Team (NEAT) of the National Association of School Psychologists, and coordinator of the experts for the development of VIRTUS® Phase II. "Our intention is to work closely with the Catholic Church and the schools to meet the individual needs of each school. For example, some schools may need to develop a peer mediation program, whereas others may already have one in place. Some schools may need assistance in dealing with gangs in the community, while others do not."



"I think it is best to use an approach developed by the Institute of Medicine where you first target the entire student body, then you target the at-risk population," Lazarus said. "The intention is to make the school as safe as possible for all students, then focus on at-risk populations."

Phase II will provide awareness and education components, increased communication and involvement by adults, and other approaches designed to modify behavior. The various program components will help foster an environment where young people learn to respect and appreciate diversity, and learn to resolve disputes through rational dialog rather than through emotionally charged physical aggression.

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Creating safe and responsive schools: starting an action plan

By Philip J. Lazarus, Ph.D.

In the aftermath of both the Columbine and September 11 tragedies, we will never again experience the same sense of safety and security as we did before these horrendous events. Ten years ago, we never could have imagined students planting bombs and shooting other students or terrorists commandeering airplanes and using them as weapons of mass destruction. Our innocence has been shattered. Consequently, we now look for new ways to protect our children and our homeland.

When society changes, schools and our nation's youths mirror these changes. For example, following Columbine, the Palm Beach County Superintendent set up a task force of students to determine the cause of adolescent anger and what could be done about it. Though the students appreciated being included, they challenged the Superintendent and responded, "It is all well and good that you put this group together following the school shooting, but how come adults did not put together an adult task force following the recent shooting at our post office?" It is to be expected that our youths copy adults. One recent example is the adolescent who flew a small plane into an office building in Tampa, Florida. In his suicide note he expressed sympathy for the September 11 terrorists.

As a result of these tragedies, our schools and nation have changed profoundly. Yet, within the past decade, researchers have found that the climate of schools has also changed. Teachers have reported that children are less respectful and more aggressive, oppositional and defiant. They tend to use more inappropriate language and display a more negative attitude. Youngsters have become more impa-



tient and impulsive and demand instant gratification. They tend to accept less personal responsibility and have greater difficulty paying attention. Moreover, school personnel report there is less parental involvement and that parents are more willing to challenge school authority and veracity.

Consequently, Catholic schools need to adapt to changing times. When many of us went to school the only safety measure we may remember was fire drills; though some of us may remember crouching under our desks in case of a nuclear attack by the Russians (as if that would have done any good). Today, we can consult crisis manuals that discuss how to respond to school shootings, bomb threats, kidnappings, armed intruders, bus accidents and now a recent addition—anthrax.

Before we get started we must be aware of this simple fact: creating safe schools is a process. It requires the commitment of all stakeholders, including school administrators, faculty, parents, law enforcement, the business community, the church, and most of all, the students themselves.

One way to get this process started is to acknowledge this commitment. Including in the mission statement of each school a reference to ensuring the safety and security of each student is a good start. Developing a mission statement that emphasizes safety and security gives students the message that they are important. Including students in the development or refinement of a mission statement further highlights their importance.

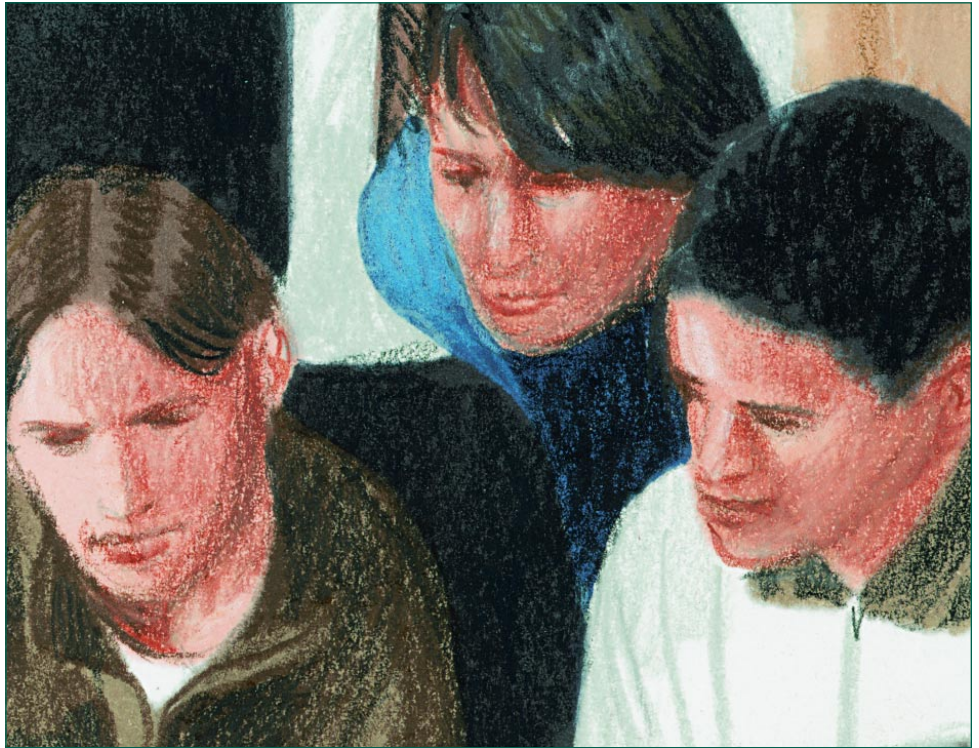
In the last issue of the *Commun-*

icare® (November 2001), the characteristics of well-functioning, effective schools were discussed. Catholic schools can develop a school safety team that looks at all 13 characteristics of safe and responsive schools and determines which characteristics are being adequately addressed and which require more attention. This is a non-threatening way for schools to begin a self-assessment. Not all 13 characteristics need to be tackled at once. Remember that developing safe schools is a process, not a final destination. Safe and responsive schools:

1. Focus on academic achievement.
2. Involve families in meaningful ways.
3. Develop links to the community.
4. Emphasize positive relationships among students and staff.
5. Discuss safety issues openly.
6. Treat students with equal respect.
7. Create ways for students to share their concerns.
8. Help children feel safe expressing their feelings.
9. Have a procedure in place for reporting children who potentially are abused or neglected.
10. Offer extended day programs for children.
11. Promote good citizenship and character.
12. Identify problems and assess progress toward solutions.
13. Support students in making the transition to adult life and the workplace.

Catholic schools can be guided by the principles of VIRTUS® which emphasize awareness, communication and timely response as they engage in this process. They need to be aware of the characteristics of safe and responsive schools, communicate to all stakeholders what they are doing to promote safety and security, and address any deficiencies with a timely response.

If a school wishes to improve its



climate and make schools safer, the research pinpoints three important factors that promote resiliency of students. The more resilient students are, the less likely they are to respond in problematic ways. Factors that promote resiliency are (a) developing meaningful connections and promoting participation of all students, (b) fostering a climate of caring and support, and (c) establishing high expectations.

Whenever we evaluate troubled youth (and especially school shooters), we find that they feel disconnected from the school. They believe that the school or students do not care about them and they typically feel rejected, humiliated or bullied.

The National Emergency Assistance Team provided assistance in the aftermath of the school shooting in Santee, California. Based upon our suggestion, the principal wrote a letter to every student in the school. In this letter she acknowledged her own thoughts and feelings. She informed them of activities that would be provided to help facilitate healing. Students were asked to respond to the principal's letter and answer questions. Within two weeks of the shooting, the principal commented that nearly every student responded. The resounding message in every letter

was that the students wanted adults more involved in their lives.

Therefore, Catholic schools need to identify those students who are disconnected from the school and develop ways for them to participate and contribute. Though disconnected youths may push adults away, they require our support. Forging meaningful connections with students is the most significant way we can make our schools safer. Our students need adults more involved in their lives.

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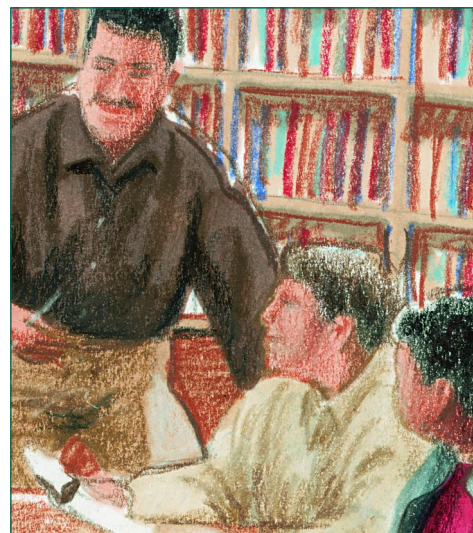
VIRTUS® Phase II: Managing Violence

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Lazarus said program developers will base VIRTUS® programs on empirical research. “For example, we know that group counseling for bullies does not stop bullying behavior ... instead they get peer validation for the acceptability of their behavior,” said Lazarus. “The best approach is to develop a bullying prevention program in the schools that focuses on the bullies, victims and the bystanders. The idea is to get the entire school committed to the unacceptability of bullying.”

“Responsibility rests foremost with administrators, faculty, staff, parents, and students—the immediate school community,” Beml said. “But, others in the community also play critical roles—government leaders, police officers, firefighters, paramedics, church leaders and members of other community and civic groups.” Lazarus emphasized Beml’s comments: “Some have said that we have had an epidemic of youth violence in our schools and the community. Americans are good at stopping epidemics. Look at what we did with polio and smallpox. I am optimistic. We must all be involved. A shift is possible. As all good sailors know, ‘a subtle shift in direction can produce a sea of change in momentum.’”

Beml explained that the scope of safe schools extends far beyond classrooms and playgrounds—parking lots, athletic facilities, bus stops, and school vehicles—the list goes on and on. Beml said he even sees an opportunity for schools and churches to work together—within their local communities—to design safety programs that enhance security in the neighborhoods children walk through on their way to school. But, he cautions, the success of those programs will depend



on effective communication and quality local outreach.

“We could create the best program in the world,” Beml said, “but if we fail to involve local people and fail to consider local concerns and local sensitivities, nobody will benefit.” Beml said schools and churches must work together within their local communities to create broad-based ownership in the solutions. “Only through local ownership will programs survive the test of time and generate the positive results we expect.”

How long will all of this take? As with other VIRTUS® programs, Beml said National Catholic views these issues as a high priority and expects to develop the awareness and education materials and tools over the next few years—materials that local schools can adopt as their own, or use to modify and enhance their existing programs. Meanwhile, National Catholic has a long-term commitment to regular, ongoing awareness and training to keep schools as prepared as possible to identify and manage the precursory violence that sometimes leads to national headlines.