

## A Comprehensive Plan to Create A Safe Learning Environment

by Steven W. Edwards, PhD

East Hartford High School in Connecticut is an urban school of 1,800 students in grades 9-12 where over 40 different languages are spoken and students come from some 70 different countries. The population is 60 percent students of color and 40 percent white.

In the fall of 1992, East Hartford High was at the crossroads of becoming another casualty of the urban educational system or addressing the many challenges and becoming a model urban school. Faced with an increased incidence of violence, weapons, drug activity, and street gangs, the school leadership implemented a comprehensive plan to address the issues and create a safe and positive learning environment for all. The result is a dramatic reduction in student suspensions and expulsions and a significant increase in academic performance as shown by standardized test scores.

With the arrival of a new principal in October 1992, the faculty and staff were asked to identify the school's greatest strengths and the areas of most concern. The group highlighted the exceptional staff and the diversity of the student population. On the other hand, concerns included the poor condition of the facility, low student achievement, violence, lack of respect, and some faculty members' fear of the student population.

In response to those concerns, a committee was formed. It developed the Together We CARE (Confident, Atmosphere, Respect, and Environment) program. Posters were designed incorporating the school mascot. The high school administration met with the faculty, staff, and students to begin implementing the program. This was the first step in the development of a comprehensive approach to creating a safe learning environment. The following is a synopsis of a number of programs, procedures, and initiatives that have been established.

### Student Assistance Center (SAC)

The SAC was instituted in the fall of 1993 to address the many issues that disrupt the school environment and prevent students from achieving academic success. The SAC provides services in three major areas:

1. Violence prevention
2. Substance abuse
3. Enhancing academics

The SAC is staffed by a director with interns from the University of Connecticut. Funding for the center is obtained

through in-kind services and grant monies. The center operates at a minimal cost to the district. Over 300 mediations are held annually, and nearly 250 different school districts from throughout the Northeast have visited this unique program. As a result of the high success rate of the SAC, *USA Today* recognized the program for excellence.

*Peer Mediation/Conflict Resolution.* Peer mediators are trained by the certified staff. When a verbal dispute occurs or when there is word of a possible altercation, SAC staff are notified and a mediation is arranged. Mediation may be conducted by peers or adults. At the end of the mediation, a contract is signed that both parties agree to abide by.

*Violence Prevention Groups.* Students who exhibit, or have a history of, violent behavior participate in violence prevention groups, which meet weekly. The groups explore the root causes of violence and alternative methods for dealing with anger. Any student who has been in a fight in school must participate in a six-week violence prevention program.

*Substance Abuse Groups.* Students who have a history of substance abuse or come from a family with substance abuse problems are welcome to participate in these forums. Any student who has been disciplined for possession or use of an illegal substance must participate in a six-week program. In addition, the school holds weekly Alcoholics Anonymous meetings.

*Career Beginnings.* The Career Beginnings program is designed to identify at-risk youth who have the aptitude for higher education. Students in their junior year of high school are selected to participate in this two-year program. Each child is assigned a mentor and attends workshops once a month at an area colleges or university, where topics relating to academic success and the college selection and acceptance process are discussed.

*Student Assistance Team (SAT).* The SAT is a group of 30 teachers who volunteer their time to meet with students in need. Any adult, student, or community member can refer a child for any reason. An SAT teacher will be assigned to see the child and, if possible, solve the problem or make a referral. SAT teachers receive training and operate as a triage unit, evaluating students' needs and making appropriate referrals.

### Police Outreach Program

In 1993, through grant funding, a division of the East Hart

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ford Police Department was established to specifically address youth issues. Officers were assigned to work with youth and schools in designated neighborhoods. Officers receive special training and also receive school assignments. The entire division has developed a cooperative relationship with the schools, sharing information and working at preventing crime and reducing arrests. The outreach officers work in the SAC, speak in classes, and help monitor the facility and student population. The unit works closely with the high school administration and security team.

### Security Evaluation

In response to violence at the high school, the school district contracted with an outside agency to review the school's security team. The analysis led to several recommendations, including these:

- ◆ Increase the hours of security officers from six to eight.
- ◆ Update equipment (radios, uniforms, technology).
- ◆ Revise Board of Education policies and procedures
- ◆ Expand staff training and development.

### Revision of Board of Education Policies and Procedures

The high school administration made several recommendations to better ensure a safe learning environment. Policies and procedures were reviewed by board attorneys and updates were made in the following areas:

- . student dress codes
- . suspension/expulsions
- . search/seizure
  - off-campus arrests
- . possession, use, and definition of weapons
- . possession and use of illegal substances

### Video Cameras

Video cameras were added to various locations throughout the building to help the security team monitor student activities. A relatively inexpensive endeavor, the cameras are another tool to assist in the reduction of behavior that detracts from the learning environment. They have contributed to the reduction of violent acts and theft. Sixteen cameras video tape 18 hours per day.

### In-House Probation

With a significant number of students on probation, the school established a program that allows probation officers to meet with children under their care at the high school. Under the new system, the probation officer, student, and assistant principal meet to review the student's standing in school and the community. The cooperation between the

two agencies allows both the school and the justice system to better meet the needs of the child.

### Alternative Programs

To reduce expulsions and create a positive alternative for disruptive children, the LIFE Program was developed. LIFE (Lifelong Initiatives For Education) combines an academic component, social skill development, and vocational training. The goal is to have behaviorally disruptive students look at school in a different way. The LIFE program has been highly successful in creating a positive school experience for children who in the past have experienced a variety of behavioral and academic difficulties and would likely have become high school dropouts. The program is so successful that students now request to be placed in it.

### Change Seminars

Change Seminars are monthly meetings that help teachers develop skills for dealing with disruptive children. Each meeting typically begins with a 15-minute presentation followed by a discussion of the day's topic. Topics generally center on behavioral issues and the role the teacher plays in addressing them. Each seminar is open to the entire staff, and the agenda is advertised in the principal's bulletin.

### University Connection

East Hartford High School serves as a professional development site for the University of Connecticut. This relationship supplies the high school with over 50 college interns each year. The interns provide countless services to the faculty, staff, and students. Interns from the school of social work and counseling department at the university are assigned to the SAC, participating in violence prevention and substance abuse education and serving as adult mediators.

### Pride Program

The PRIDE (Personal Responsibility In Daily Effort) program was designed to motivate students toward improvements in behavior, attendance, and academics. Every three weeks a PRIDE Night is held at the high school. PRIDE Night consists of open gym for basketball, volleyball, badminton, and double-dutch.

PRIDE Night also features dancing, karaoke, ping-pong, and board games. Each PRIDE Night is sponsored by a local business, and students receive free refreshments and are eligible for door prizes. In most cases, a guest speaker

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gives the students a brief inspirational message. The program runs for two hours and is staffed by teachers and parent volunteers. To qualify, students must receive a favorable evaluation on established criteria from their teachers. Student attendance at this popular event is usually between 350 and 400 children.

### **Results**

Since the inception of the Together We CARE program in 1992 and the addition of the initiatives just described, East Hartford High School has demonstrated some impressive statistics:

- 49 percent reduction in incidents of fighting/assaults
- 55 percent reduction in suspensions
- 750 percent reduction in expulsions
- 20 percent increase in CAPT (Connecticut Academic Performance Test) scores
- 10 percent increase in SAT scores

The November 26, 1997, *Hartford Courant* listed East Hartford as the Connecticut community facing the greatest challenges. It highlighted a report from the Connecticut Conference of Municipalities, which based its findings on the following criteria:

1. Low test scores
2. Poverty
3. Dropout rates
4. Ability to pay for education
5. Household income
6. Other indicators

Considering these factors, the positive changes the school has been able to accomplish are dramatic.

*Steven W. Edwards is principal of East Hartford High School. For more information on any of the initiatives mentioned in this article, call him at (860) 282-3203.*