

EDUCATION WEEK

Study Links School Safety to Achievement, Relationships

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Chicago



School safety depends far less on the poverty and crime surrounding the campus than on the academic achievement of its students and their relationships with adults in the building, according to a new study of Chicago public schools.

The **report**, released Tuesday by the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago, finds that while schools in high-poverty, high-crime neighborhoods tend to be less safe than other schools, students' level of academic achievement actually plays a bigger role in school safety than a school's neighborhood. Furthermore, even in high-poverty, high-crime neighborhoods, the quality of relationships among adults and students at a school can turn one school into a safe haven while another languishes as a center of violence.

"It was surprising, because you think it's all about crime and poverty in the neighborhood, but we found what's far more important is when you are concentrating together many students with a history of poor performance in school, that's when you're likely to have a very unsafe environment," said Elaine M. Allensworth, a co-author of the study and the senior director and chief research officer at CCSR. "It makes sense when you think about it, because these kids are frustrated, they haven't done well in school and haven't been engaged in school," which, in turn, may make them more likely to act out or to feel insecure in a school setting.

Ms. Allensworth and co-authors Matthew P. Steinberg, a doctoral student at the University of Chicago's Harris School of Public Policy, and David W. Johnson, a research assistant at CCSR, compared nearly 120,000 student and more than 12,500 teacher responses from Chicago from 2009 surveys on school safety and climate to the city's neighborhood crime statistics, neighborhood and school demographics, and student achievement test scores. In particular, the researchers looked at the incoming achievement scores of students entering middle and high schools. The authors also conducted case studies on three schools considered by their teachers and students to be "safe," "typical," and "unsafe."

Researchers found that teachers and students generally agreed on the level of safety in a school, and, regardless of the level of crime around the campus itself, schools were safer when their students came from safer neighborhoods. However, the strongest predictor of school safety was the previous academic achievement of incoming students. Researchers found differences in academic achievement accounted for fully half of the differences in students' and teachers' reports of school safety.

Researchers said the link between school safety and academic achievement could be an important factor to take into consideration for low-performing schools struggling to turn around their students' academic achievement.

"Given that they are getting students with very low academic achievement, turnaround schools are going to immediately face substantial problems with climate around school safety," Ms. Allensworth said. "They're going to have to have good strategies to improve the climate—and then, when you have a school that's more orderly and safer, it will be easier to work on issues of achievement."

School Trust

If demographics and academic achievement told the whole story, then the Mary McLeod Bethune School of Excellence on Chicago's west side would seem likely to be a pretty scary place, rather than being **identified** by CCSR as one of the district's safe schools.

The school's East Garfield Park neighborhood is filled with aging, sometimes boarded-up homes with overgrown yards. Nearly 100 percent of the students are black and living in poverty: 98 percent of the 241 preschool-through-8th-grade students receive free lunch, and about 1 percent receive reduced-price lunch. Chicago school district officials deemed Bethune one of their lowest-performing schools in the 2009-2010 school year, leading to schoolwide staff layoffs.

Neither students nor their parents felt safe at the school two years ago, recalled Enix Daniels, a former student who has been a parent volunteer during the last three principal administrations.

"Oh, man, you walked in this school, you wouldn't even hear yourself," Mr. Daniels said. "If you would have walked in here before, teachers would be standing outside, asking each other, 'What are you doing Friday night?' and not paying attention to their kids in class making noise."

Since the school's takeover by the Chicago-based turnaround group the Academy of Urban School Leadership, the difference in climate is audible: quiet in the halls, soft-spoken teachers in the classrooms, with even kindergarteners and 1st graders enthusiastic but attentive.

Principal Zipporah K. Hightower attributes the change to a schoolwide focus on staff getting to know all the students.

"We're watching on a day-to-day basis: If a child's walking in with an expression on his face like they might have a bad day, we pull that child aside immediately," Ms. Hightower said. "If a child doesn't have someone to talk to, they will carry [those problems] into the classroom."

Before and after school, a security guard and several parent volunteers patrol the schoolyard and surrounding block—the area in which students are most likely to feel unsafe, according to the CCSR—and at least three adults greet each student by name as they come into school.

Ms. Hightower is often among them, something Mr. Daniels said has boosted parent engagement.

"You see Ms. Hightower standing out here now," he said Monday morning. "I've never seen a dean or a principal or nothing really come out of the school and watch these kids. When a kid feels loved, they know that, and they know when they come to school they are safe."

Ms. Hightower noted that parents have become more willing to call her or teachers over the weekend if there is trouble at home.

Those relationships have made it easier to deal with more severe safety issues on campus. After a trio of 7th graders "borrowed" a parent's car for a joyride over the weekend, Ms. Hightower was able to retrieve the keys quietly and have the students meet with a community police officer—without threatening them with an official arrest. Similarly, after a fight broke out among 2nd and 3rd graders that resulted in mandatory out-of-school suspensions, teachers pulled all students from both grades, including the suspended students, into a group discussion about how the situation could have been handled.

"We keep a lot of adults around, so we want to know, why did [the students] feel in such immediate danger that you couldn't ask an adult for help? They need to understand that they need to come to us,"

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Ms. Hightower said.

Each class posts a character-based goal, such as raising a hand and waiting before speaking, and visitors to the classes are expected to give students feedback on how well they meet the goal. Teachers have joint planning time five days a week to discuss student academic and behavior issues.

The district has not yet released annual student and parent survey data yet for 2010, but since 2009, the school's daily attendance rate has increased from 91.6 percent to 95 percent—which is the district average, according to the Chicago public schools Web site—and Mr. Daniels said the number of parent volunteers has increased from a bare handful to about 20.

The school's reading, mathematics, and particularly science performance increased from 2009 to 2010, but this year's test results are not complete yet, so the school remains on academic probation.

Yet Bethune's approach still highlights a model the consortium thinks could benefit other schools in academic distress.

"You have some schools who are not serving very disadvantaged students at all, but they have very weak climates because they don't have very strong relationships with the students or the community, and other schools serving more disadvantaged students, but the relationships are stronger and they look all right," Ms. Allensworth said. "It's really all about whether students feel like they can trust their teachers, and parents feel teachers are partners in their child's education. That's by far the most important factor in school safety."