Violence Prevention in Georgia's Rural Public Schools: Perceptions of School Superintendents

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VIOLENCE PREVENTION IN GEORGIA’S RURAL PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEMS: PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS

By Chet Ballard

ABSTRACT

A survey of school superintendents in 81 public school systems in rural Georgia was conducted to describe strategies being pursued to prevent school violence and promote a safe and disciplined learning environment. Among the surveyed superintendents, there was widespread recognition of school safety as a high priority item and evidence of use of law enforcement and technology to deter violence in schools. Descriptive data analysis suggests that school size and county economic conditions relate to school superintendents’ assessment of school safety and potential for violence. This research addresses a void in the literature on violence in rural schools and provides descriptive information of interest to educators, rural sociologists, community leaders, and parents.

INTRODUCTION

Lamar Alexander, Secretary of Education under former president George Bush, authored a plan for improving education in America which set forth six goals (U.S. Department of Education, 1991). Each goal...
addressed problems in American education documented in several important comparative studies (Altbach & Kelly, 1986; Educational Testing Service, 1992; Inkeles, 1982; U.S. Department of Education 1985). While evidence mounted that the United States was falling farther behind other industrial and post-industrial nations in key technology areas, particularly math and science, there was growing realization that none of the planned reforms would have a chance to work unless students, teachers, administrators, and staff felt safe at school. Alexander’s plan stated that “every school in America will be free of drugs and violence and will offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning” (U.S. Department of Education, 1991, p.19). Although this was Goal 6 in the America 2000 plan, it was renumbered “Job 1” by many school administrators, school board members, parents, and teachers.

It is not news that discipline is a school problem. The Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll, a survey which chronicles the public’s attitudes about schools, has found that “lack of discipline” topped the list of concerns in 1975 and 1981 and then slipped to second place following “use of drugs” in 1991. More recently, in 1994, discipline was second to concern about “fighting/gangs/violence” (Elam, Rose, & Gallup, 1994, p. 42). Lack of discipline in the 1970s meant disrespectful comments and failure to respond to instructions, but in the 1990s, the issue of maintaining discipline was pushed aside by fights, gangs, and violent acts on school property. Society and the streets had become more violent and so, too, had schools. Parents demanded safe schools, the president had given safe schools a mandate in the America 2000 plan, and school administrators recognized that something must be done to prevent violence, if schools were to change, to improve, to be “safe and disciplined learning environments.”

Dealing with violence is now part of administrative reality for school officials. Violence at school goes beyond the physical or emotional harm to the initial victim(s). It attacks the learning process as fear of crime infects the environment of the school, its students, faculty, staff,

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2 Without a doubt, the emphasis on education through lottery funds has impacted the school safety strategies being pursued by school superintendents throughout rural public schools described in this study. In fiscal year 1994 alone, all of Georgia’s 1,845 public schools applied for and received a total of $20 million in “safe school” grants, used to purchase much of the technology discussed above, including video cameras, metal detectors, radios, and fencing (Valdosta Daily Times, July 21, 1996:A1).
and administration (Hertz, 1994). However, while gangs and violence on school property are familiar topics for urban school administrators and parents, far less is known about violence in rural schools. The rapid growth of juvenile violence, suggests that rural areas will not be excluded from the social forces at work in the nation’s educational institutions (Pearson & Toby, 1991; U.S. Department of Justice, 1995).

There is little published work on rural education and school violence despite increasing interest in other rural crime topics, such as farm crime, fear of criminal victimization, and violent crime (Bachman, 1992; Bankston, Jenkins, Thayer-Doyle, & Thompson, 1987; Saltiel, Gilchrist, & Harvie, 1992). Crime in rural boomtowns has also received research attention (Krannich, Berry, & Greider, 1989). Garkovich and Bell (1995) note that in Rural Sociology, articles addressing social welfare, of which the topics of crime and victimization are a very small part, have doubled during the past decade, but none of these articles focus on crime and violence in one of rural society’s most significant institutions, education. In fact, their analysis of changing trends in articles published in Rural Sociology from 1936-1995 documents a paucity of information published about rural educational institutions and juvenile violence.

**National Trends in Safety**

The growing perception that public schools are unsafe and that safety concerns have compromised learning has been the subject of recent studies conducted by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). In a report titled *Violence and Discipline Problems in U.S. Public Schools: 1996-97*, survey results from a nationally representative sample of 1,234 public schools, stratified by level (elementary, middle, and secondary), by locality (city, urban fringe, town, rural), and by school size (less than 300, 300-999, 1,000 or more) reveals some informative data about the school crime/school safety nexus. Over 1,400 school principals were sent questionnaires; the response rate for the survey was 88 percent.

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*Bachus (1994) reports that California was the first state to require school districts to keep statistics on school crime and Florida and South Carolina implemented state-wide reporting systems shortly thereafter.*
None of the schools reported that a murder had taken place on school property or at school sponsored events and only four schools reported that a suicide had taken place. The sample size was not large enough to yield reliable estimates for these incidents (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). However, more than half of the schools surveyed did report at least one crime incident during school year 1996-97, and 10 percent of the schools reported at least one serious violent crime during that school year. Fights without a weapon topped the list of reported crimes in public schools. More violent crimes (murder, rape, suicide, physical attack or fight with a weapon, or robbery) were relatively rare events; only one in ten schools reported experiencing one or more of these crimes during that school year. Similarly, Bachus’ (1994) survey of 700 school districts, “revealed 69 percent of rural districts reported student assaults and fights as the most frequent type of violence” (p. 19).

Though teachers in rural schools report experiences and perceptions about violence similar to urban teachers (U.S. Department of Education, 1992), several studies have found that metro area schools are at the highest risk for violence, followed by suburban, and then rural schools (Price & Everett, 1997). The trend toward younger and younger offenders is well documented (Toch, Gest, & Guttman, 1993), and in Georgia, like the rest of the nation, although crime rates dropped overall, large increases occurred among juveniles, and arrests for major crimes by juveniles were up 141 percent since 1990 (Crime rate declines, juvenile rate jumps, 1995).

Factors Associated with School Safety

The relationship of size of school and school violence is confirmed in NCES’ (U.S. Department of Education, 1998) national report: “School crime was more likely in larger schools...(and) schools in cities were at least twice as likely to report serious violent crime as those in towns and rural locations, although city schools were not significantly different from urban fringe schools.” The number of incidents increases as school size increases, and among the largest schools, 89 percent reported criminal incidents compared to 38 percent of the smallest size schools in the study. Schools with higher proportions of minority students were more likely to report crimes than schools with smaller enrollments of minority students. Interestingly, the presence of police or law enforcement officers on campus was positively related to
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reports of serious crime. However, this may be an artifact of more aggressive law enforcement or accurate reporting.

Most public schools are employing low levels of security to deter violence. The majority (84 percent) employ passive measures to restrict access to their schools, without the use of metal detectors or guards.

Would these relationships observed at the national level be found in public schools located in rural Georgia? The present study explores the relationship of school size to reports of weapons on campus. Would economic status, poverty, be associated with confiscation of knives or guns on campus? Using data from Georgia's rural public schools, reported by school superintendents, this study examines whether concern about school safety manifests itself in use of safety technology and an increased presence of law enforcement personnel on campus. Would rural schools located adjacent to urban fringe or metropolitan schools be different from more isolated rural public schools in Georgia? This study addresses these relationships.

STUDY CONTEXT

Georgia's rural counties have 32 percent of the state's seven million people. Poverty rates for rural counties exceed those in urban counties by 58 percent; and 15 percent of all Georgians and almost half of rural Georgians live in counties designated by the USDA as “persistent poverty counties.” Rural counties have twice as many adults with educational levels of less than ninth grade and higher levels of dropout rates than urban areas of Georgia. In urban counties, 15 percent of adults lack a high school diploma, but in rural Georgia, 22 percent lack a high school diploma. Teen birth rates are highest in isolated rural counties, followed by metro-adjacent rural counties, and then urban counties. These and other economic and educational problems have helped create conditions which impact families and school-aged children. There are fewer resources at individual, family, and community levels to deal with these problems and schools take on even greater importance as the institution with the most daily contact with Georgia's rural youth (Rural health in Georgia, 1997).

The growing awareness of the importance of schools and education, and efforts to address the issue of “safe schools” led local school system administrators, faculty, parents and students to begin a
dialogue and assess local conditions. In 1991, school administrators from all school systems in Lowndes County, Georgia (two public and three private systems) reached consensus on the need to conduct a community-wide study of schools, focusing on school discipline and school safety concerns as a response to the national call for school improvement trumpeted by the Education 2000 plan. The county’s educational leaders decided to conduct surveys of students, teachers, and administrators across the five local school systems. Although time and resources limited the study to a 15 percent systematic random sample of students, the results of the study sparked community discussion of ways to improve schools and led to implementation of meaningful plans to make local schools safer and better (Ballard & McCoy, 1996).

School administrators in Ballard and McCoy’s (1996) initial study were asked to identify factors which they believed would relate to school violence. Size of the school system, geographic proximity to a metropolitan area, and county economic status were items they listed. School safety concerns, they suggested, would vary mainly by the size of the school system and proximity to an urban area. Gang activity, weapons, and actual acts of violence would also vary according to size and proximity. Smaller, more rural school systems would report less concern and attention to school violence, they predicted, because these school systems display more intimacy and greater social control through informal and formal networks such as family and religion.

The issues raised in the earlier research laid the foundation for the current focus on describing how Georgia’s rural public school systems are responding to school safety issues and documenting strategies used to prevent violence at school. The present study describes the methods and technologies implemented in rural schools of differing size, location, and structure to protect students from violence at school. Are rural school systems experiencing the same level of violence found in urban schools? Are the same factors present in rural schools that have been reported in urban schools related to school violence?

METHODS

Georgia's non-metropolitan county public school systems were defined as the study population for this research. Of the state's 114 rural public school systems (Bachtel & Boatwright, 1995), 81 school
superintendents responded to the survey (71 percent). Sixteen non-
metropolitan independent city school systems were excluded from the
study population to maintain consistency in the study population
definition. These independent city school systems represent
nonmetropolitan cities, and although their location is rural, these schools
are not comparable to consolidated county school systems based on
location (nonmetropolitan city districts versus rural county districts). A
few superintendents (4) declined to participate by telephone and 29
superintendents failed to complete or return the survey instrument. All
respondents were told to restrict their responses to their experiences
during the 1994-1995 school year. Overall, cooperation by school
superintendents and administrative staff members in the scheduling of
face-to-face or telephone interviews and in following instructions
regarding the completion and return of the survey was very good.

The initial data collection stage involved face to face interviews
with school superintendents in rural county systems located within one
hour’s drive from Valdosta, Georgia. A second stage of data collection,
based on telephone interviews and faxing of the survey instrument, was
then conducted. The majority of rural school systems (61) included in the
study population participated via telephone interviews and faxed surveys.

FINDINGS

Violence Prevention Policies

Seventy-four percent of the 81 superintendents responding said
school violence was an explicit agenda item for school officials during the
past year. Less than half (46 percent) reported that new policies to address
school violence were being implemented at the start of the school year.
However, that almost half of the school systems in this study
implemented new policies related to school safety is an indication of the
priority given this topic and its potential as an agent of institutional
change.

Searches

It was common (75 percent) for rural school superintendents to
authorize searches as part of the effort to prevent drugs and violence on
school grounds. A variety of strategies were reported, from random searches to searches only when a problem was detected. Locker searches were quite common (77 percent). Searches using drug-sniffing dogs were also prevalent in these rural schools (73 percent). The use of dogs would be even higher were it not for the lack of access and resources some isolated rural systems face. For example, these school superintendents believe it is a good strategy to use drug dogs, but some also believe it to be troublesome to implement. The time needed to arrange the use of the dogs from another county’s law enforcement department and to otherwise coordinate logistics defeats the rapid response goal of this tactic.

Videocamera Surveillance

All school superintendents surveyed reported using videocameras on school buses. The use of cameras for surveillance and violence deterrence has, in their opinion, reduced violent acts, disciplinary problems, and complaints about lack of safety on school buses. But, due to the cost factor, it is not common to find “live” videocameras on every bus. In fact, substantially less than half (39 percent) of the school systems have live cameras in every school bus. Use of cameras to monitor student behavior on campus varies by system. Central locations such as large entry foyers and cafeterias were the most common on-campus locations monitored by camera surveillance. A small number of rural school systems use cameras to monitor parking lots at high schools.

Metal Detectors

Most of the superintendents (80 percent) have not installed fixed doorway style metal detectors in their schools (Figure 1). Hand-held metal detectors are more common (64 percent), but this figure is misleading. When asked if they actually use these hand-held detectors, about half said that they do not use them on a regular basis. Some superintendents did not recall where the detectors are stored, underscoring the point that having the technology and using it are two different things. Among one-quarter of the superintendents, weapons interception is considered as less urgent, less of an everyday concern.
Figure 1. Use of metal detectors in rural Georgia school districts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>64%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Security Alarm Systems and Fencing

Although 75 percent of the rural school systems make use of security alarms in various buildings on their campuses, the most frequently wired buildings are administrative offices. In order of frequency, high school buildings (34 percent) and then middle school buildings (less than 10 percent) have an alarm system. Fencing and other forms of barriers are not widely used. Schools tend to use fencing for security purposes when the school campus is located in a neighborhood with a relatively high volume of foot traffic or when administration wants to control access to a parking lot. In rural Georgia, the 1970s and 1980s were school consolidation years. The larger combined high and middle schools were often built on the outskirts of town, in what had been open space. The need to fence was not as pronounced as it was when a school was located in a residential neighborhood and/or business district.
Dresscodes, Bookbags, and Beepers

Virtually every school system regulates how students dress, but there is little agreement across rural schools regarding what clothing, jewelry, or body adornments (piercing, tattoos, hairstyles) are to be prohibited. Only a few trends bear discussion here, since the main trend is no trend. Clothing which reveals “too much” of the body is typically banned, as are shirts or pants bearing explicitly sexual messages, obscenities, or gang related symbols. What is offensive is not consistent across the school systems surveyed. For example, about half the school system superintendents said the wearing of an earring by a male student would be defined as “disruptive behavior” and about half did not. Emerging dresscode issues, such as body piercing and tattoos, are still in the process of being codified.

Bookbags are allowed in 93 percent of the systems surveyed, but some schools add restrictions such as prohibiting bookbags in high school, but not middle or elementary schools. Limiting bookbags to lockers is a less common practice. A much smaller number of schools permit only mesh or clear plastic bookbags to enhance prevention of violence or drugs in school.

Beepers are generally prohibited, but exceptions are made in a few systems on a case by case basis for students whose parents have a compelling reason for communication by beeper.

Walkie-Talkies

The walkie-talkie or two-way radio has found widespread use (98 percent) in rural school systems. Obviously, the need for this item goes beyond safety and prevention of violence. In many of the rural systems in this study population, students travel long distances over rural highways and the walkie-talkie is an important communication tool installed on school buses. Three superintendents reported direct links via walkie-talkies between the superintendent’s office and the county sheriff’s office.

Law Enforcement Presence on School Grounds

Uniformed police officers are on campus in 85 percent of the rural school systems in this study. Police officers are there for three main
purposes: as school resource officers, as DARE Program officers, and for traffic control/security reasons (Figure 2). Uniformed officers are called as needed to stop fights, to remove students from campus, and to respond to emergencies. Nearly 80 percent of superintendents called police to campus during the previous school year.

A program funded from state lottery monies, “Cops Fast,” has assisted schools by financing school resource officer positions. Five school systems in this study obtained school resource officers on campus through this program.

Removal of Weapons

Slightly over half of the superintendents surveyed reported removing at least one gun from a student in their system during the past school year. In systems where a gun or guns were confiscated, "one or two guns" was the modal response. Only three superintendents reported removing three or more guns. Removal of knives was more common (88 percent), and about two-thirds of the superintendents removed 1-5 knives. A Georgia statute defines knives with blades exceeding three inches to be

Figure 2. Presence of police officers on school grounds by type.
weapons that must be confiscated and reported by school officials. Only 8 of 81 superintendents in this study had not removed a knife from a student last year. In systems where more than 5 knives were removed, the range was between 6 and 30. Regarding guns superintendents were quick to point out that many of the weapons removed were neither loaded nor operable, and many of the knives removed did not exceed the three-inch blade statute. Superintendents also reported removing a variety of other types of weapons, including razorblade box cutters, bats, clubs, and a throwing star.

Most Common Form of Violence Observed

In virtually all school systems in this study, fistfighting was the predominant form of violence observed on school grounds. Superintendents said that after fistfights, violent threats between or among students were also common. Only two superintendents reported gang violence as the most typical form of violence found in their school systems.

Other Violent Episodes

Not all school safety problems involve students. Violent incidents may include an angry parent, staff and faculty, or disgruntled former employees or former students. Attacks on school system personnel are rare, yet these are often the most violent cases. Superintendents have noted the need for greater awareness and control of people who are "visitors" to school grounds, and although it is very difficult to prevent a violent episode from being caused by a "visitor," more media attention is being given this issue. As many as 10 assaults on faculty were reported by these 81 superintendents, and one superintendent had been personally attacked. As expected, many of these assaults occurred as school personnel intervened in student fights, which was the most frequently reported form of violence at school.
Student Discipline Programs

Georgia’s rural public school systems often make use of two programs to maintain discipline and protect the quality of the learning environment: alternative schools and in-school suspension programs. The alternative schools concept has grown in popularity in Georgia’s public school systems, and 85 percent of the superintendents in this study have this program in operation. They use alternative schools to separate disruptive students from the mainstream population of students in the system. For these disruptive students, the alternative school is the last option, other than not attending any public school. Many rural school systems must enter into consortiums or cooperative agreements with adjoining rural public school systems to pool resources necessary to fund alternative schools. In one case, as many as five schools were cooperating to operate an alternative school program. In-school suspension is another popular program, used in over 97 percent of the systems surveyed to handle disciplinary problems judged less serious than those producing referrals to an alternative school program.

School Safety Concerns: Growing, Lessening, Staying the Same?

The fact that about half of the superintendents believe school safety to be a growing concern is a significant statement in itself. Only 4 of 81 superintendents surveyed reported school safety becoming less of a concern. Superintendents acknowledge that even one violent episode disturbs the public perception of safety at school and media coverage of school violence today is a certainty. Older superintendents recalled past days when scattered episodes of violence at school might not have been of interest to the media at all. The vast majority of superintendents do not believe that Georgia’s rural public schools are experiencing an epidemic of violence. To the contrary, they point out how safe schools are and all that is being done to respond to demands that schools be made more secure.

Does the location of the school system, adjacent to or distant from a metropolitan area, affect superintendents’ opinions and reported actions? Does school system size relate to school safety? Does economic status of the county relate to superintendents’ responses? Does spending per pupil have any relation to trends described above? To explore the
differences that may exist between larger and smaller sized rural schools, a comparison of means is presented in Table 1.5

Size of school was a significant predictor of the number of guns and knives removed from students by school officials. Enrollment data were used to divide the study population into smaller sized (less than 2,000 students) and larger sized (2,000 or more) school systems. The effect of enrollment size suggests that superintendents serving smaller school systems report less concern about safety and remove fewer weapons. School size was also a significant indicator of level of concern about school safety expressed by superintendents. The size factor appears to make a difference in school safety, and concern about preventing violence in schools may explain why superintendents search for, and find, weapons on school grounds. There are no significant differences between counties distant from a metropolitan area and counties adjacent to metro counties in the superintendents’ concern about school safety and removal of weapons. This finding contradicts what many superintendents believe to be true.

Concern about school safety was significantly different when an analysis of the economic rank of the counties was performed (Table 2). Lower ranking on a set of economic indicators was associated with a higher level of concern expressed by superintendents about school safety. This is an interesting finding which merits further exploration to determine how poverty and social class factors affect perception of school safety in rural communities. Note, too, that most rural counties in Georgia are below the state economic average (Bachtel & Boatwright, 1995). The nonsignificant results for spending per pupil, weapons removed, and

4The variable “overall concern about safety” was measured with a single item on the administrators’ survey instrument which asked, “Overall, do you believe school safety concerns are growing, staying about the same, or lessening. Metro adjacency was defined as an ordinal level measure based on whether a school system was located in a county adjacent to a metropolitan county or not. School size was measured by enrollment figures; school systems with over 2,000 or more students were defined as “larger” and school systems with less than 2,000 students were classified as “smaller.” Economic rank of the county was originally measured as an interval level measure combining information on personal income, sales tax receipts, motor vehicle tags, and measured property value as a composite score. County economic rank was then converted to an ordinal measure with “higher” and “lower” categories based on numerical ranks of the 81 counties included in this analysis split into two groupings. Cost per pupil was re-coded from raw data (in dollars) to three categories (high, medium, and low) with approximately equal number of cases assigned to each category (range,$3,672-6,572). Data for these variables are taken from the 1995 Georgia County Guide (Bachtel & Boatwright, 1995).
Table 1. Concern about school safety and removal of weapons by school size and proximity to a metropolitan county (N=81).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent Variable</th>
<th>Larger</th>
<th>Smaller</th>
<th>Distant Rural</th>
<th>Metro Adjacent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of guns removed</td>
<td>1.68</td>
<td>.547</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>.561</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.01)*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of knives removed</td>
<td>2.26</td>
<td>.549</td>
<td>1.85</td>
<td>.534</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.004)*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall concern about safety</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>.542</td>
<td>1.74</td>
<td>.631</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1=high concern)</td>
<td>(.03)*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* P-value for the t-test for equality of means with equal variances is reported in parentheses. Significance level reported for difference between means: p<.05.
Table 2. Concern about school safety and removal of weapons by economic rank of county and spending per pupil (N=81).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Economic Rank by County</th>
<th>Spending per Pupil</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of guns removed</td>
<td>.2061</td>
<td>.0753</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p=.099</td>
<td>p=.551</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of knives removed</td>
<td>.1421</td>
<td>.0582</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p=.259</td>
<td>p=.645</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall concern</td>
<td>-.3051</td>
<td>.0404</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p=.013</td>
<td>p=.749</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pearson’s Correlation Coefficient Values/1 Tailed Tests.

overall concern about school safety may appear inconsistent with economic ranking differences.

DISCUSSION

The main goal of this research was to describe school superintendents’ perceptions of safety and violence prevention efforts in Georgia’s rural public schools. The results suggest that school size and economic rank of the county relate to the school safety issues analyzed in this study. The perception of school violence as a real and present danger also relates to school system size. According to the superintendents studied, rural public schools in Georgia are relatively safe, disciplined educational environments. However, larger sized schools appear more at risk for potential incidents of school violence.

School system size affects differences in perception of the seriousness of school violence as a real threat to student safety. It is important for rural school superintendents, school board members, parents, and community residents to learn what strategies are being pursued in counties larger, smaller, and similar in size to their own school system. School size is significant for several reasons. First, small rural schools may display a degree of intimacy, solidarity, and social control based on primary group relations not easy to maintain in larger schools. In fact, school superintendents from smaller, more distant school systems
stated that they can take care of school violence issues less publicly, dealing directly with the students involved and their families. It is precisely the intimacy of rural communities which makes this form of social control possible and which may not be found in larger settings. The size dimension is relevant to rural distant counties where larger consolidated schools may be efficient financially but may place students at greater risk of violence.

The public’s perception of school safety is an important point suggested by this analysis. Fear of crime and violence is a real concern of many people in our society. Even as national crime rates have fallen for most violent crimes, and juvenile crime rates continue a downward, if temporary, trend, public opinion still ranks crime and violence as serious, significant problems for our society and its institutions. Rural school administrators must not assume that school violence “can’t happen here.”

This analysis found that superintendents in smaller, more remote rural systems are less convinced that school violence is a problem. They suggest that, despite state law, they might ignore a hunting rifle observed in a student’s car or truck or dismiss as insignificant a knife, which they construct as an artifact of rural culture, rather than as a potential danger for the safety of the school. As one superintendent remarked, “If I had to search vehicles in the parking lot, I would spend all my time on this and no time on the things I should be doing.” Of course, a danger exists when weapons are on campus and ignored. The “wait for something to happen before responding” attitude expressed by a small number of school superintendents, especially in distant counties, is a risky strategy. School superintendents in Georgia’s public schools are appointees, vulnerable to pressure from school board members and the court of public opinion. A single episode of school violence can incite emotional responses, including intensive state and even national media coverage.

As schools increase in size, more school resource officers are on campus and the attempt to control and deter violence is more visible. In fact, having law enforcement officers on campus reduces response time should violence occur and decreases the need to call police to school, since they are already there.

The answers a researcher receives in research reports depend on whom the researcher asks, and this study is no exception. All of the data reported here come from the perspective of school superintendents whose jobs legitimately involve public relations and defending their school
systems from perceived harm. Furthermore, school politics must also be considered when interpreting the results of this study, since school superintendents must be attentive to school boards and community interest groups for job security. Research using self-reports routinely find large differences in responses based on position in the institution. Administrators generally report fewer violations of school rules than do teachers and students. However, while the level of violence reported in urban schools does not characterize these rural public school systems, larger rural schools face higher probabilities for violence. The majority of school superintendents surveyed are taking school safety very seriously and have taken steps, such as using of technology, to prevent violence from occurring.

REFERENCES


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