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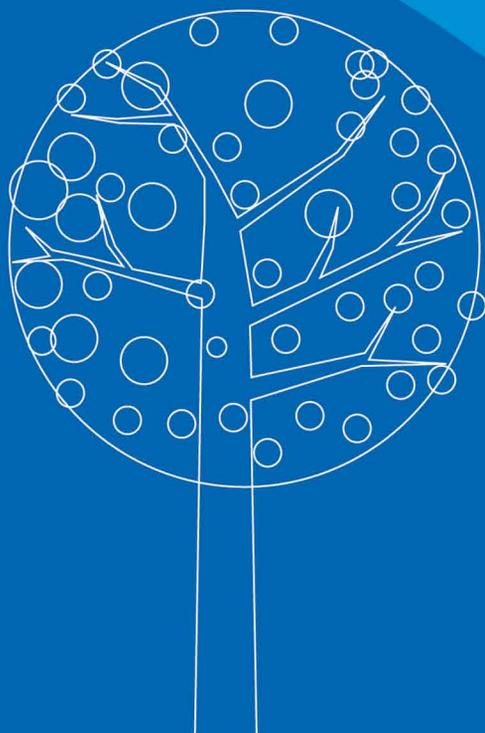


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Curbing School Violence: A Recipe for Success



Inner-city school mixes faith, discipline, caring and hope with innovative programs

Gesu eighth graders Aliyah and Semaj, two members of the school's peer mediation team, learn how to help their classmates resolve conflict under the guidance of teacher Eileen Erwin.

Patricia McGrenra, IHM

Drive-by shootings. Drug dealing on corners. Lack of hope driven by poverty and unemployment. Scary dreams of all too real street violence.

This is what most of the children who attend Gesu School, an inner-city independent Catholic school in the Jesuit and IHM traditions, face in their North Philadelphia neighborhoods. While we may not be able to protect all of our 455 pre-K to eighth grade students from violence in their outside world, we can provide a safe haven in our school and prevent them from replicating what they see. The children themselves usually want to avoid

violence because they have already experienced too much tragedy in their lives.

But to give the right kind of support and guidance, we have to understand what's going on outside of our walls and how it affects our children. At our annual Gesu Symposium on Transforming Inner-City Education, for instance, panelists confirmed our knowledge that extreme stress from exposure to violence (and chronic fear of violence) causes significant damage to the learning and memory areas of the brain and can trigger aggressive behavior, lower self-esteem, depression and anxiety. One highly regarded expert, Dr. Harold S. Koplewicz, said, "What helps protect children is close-

ness with adults who are there for them, emotionally and physically."

Of all the ways we try to reduce the possibility of violence in our school, this is probably the hardest to quantify, yet the most effective. Our children know that once they come inside our doors, they're under the watchful eyes of many caring people. From our teachers, administrators and counselors to our specialists, volunteers, maintenance workers and even the students themselves, everyone here is dedicated to our children, looking out for them and taking ownership of problems like a family. And we do more to create an environment of safety and promise for each child in our care.

Based on the IHM congregation's

philosophy that all children can learn using their God-given talents, we combine high expectations, positive reinforcement and accountability for actions. We emphasize prevention by setting clear behavioral guidelines and attempting to catch problems early. Every year each family is given our handbook and code of behavior to review and sign, and it's revised often throughout the year to address new issues as they arise. While we don't tolerate fighting, foul language or total disrespect, our "three strikes" system takes into consideration each child and situation individually. When there is a problem, we create a positive behavior modification plan, praising the child if behavior improves or reevaluating the plan if not, to see what might work better.

Combating Effects of the Environment

Although that approach goes a long way toward helping our students avoid violence, we need to combat the effects of their environment as well. Since we are not a selective school, we see children with all levels of ability and backgrounds, from students with intact, supportive families to those being raised by single teen parents or struggling grandparents. Away from school our children often are exposed to negative influences, disruption and depicted violence in TV shows and video games, yet they're usually not allowed the healthier alternative of playing outside because of real street violence. Unfortunately what they see in the movies, their neighborhood and sometimes their own families is that the answer to any argument is aggression—and these days that holds true for girls as much as for boys. The direct result is an uptick in conflicts on Mondays and when we return from school breaks.

Our chaplain, Jesuit Father Neil Ver'Schneider, plays a vital role in discipline. When students get out of sorts and don't respond to classroom correction, teachers can send them down to



Gesu exposes children to a world of possibilities through such initiatives as a trip to the United Nations. Kakra Taylor-Hayford (left), wife of Patrick Hayford, director of the U.N. Office of the Special Adviser on Africa, meets with eighth graders Nia, Aliyah and Logan and their tour guide during their visit.

Fr. Neil—usually with work—for resolution. Often he will have them write about what happened, which helps calm them down and gives them the chance to think about the root of the problem and their own ideas for solving it. He will then speak to them and, if necessary, refer them to me or to Margaret Mary O'Neill, our certified school counselor. Detentions and calls home to parents generally work well, as does the very real threat of school suspension—something most of our children dread, knowing it is a supreme hardship on their parents to take off from work.

Addressing the needs of the "whole child" also helps minimize the potential for violence. About half of our students benefit from our counseling ministry programs, which include grief support, behavioral therapy and social service referrals. Our "No Putdowns" program creates a school culture where unkindness is not allowed, and our peer mediation program trains selected fifth through eighth graders to work with fel-

low students in supervised sessions to mediate conflict. And for our many children who have no one to go home to or someone to help with homework during the high-risk after-school hours, we provide meaningful alternatives through our homework club and our "Gesu Extra Mile" (GEM) program, which offers older students structured, supervised activities such as piano and Latin lessons and creative pursuits such as scrapbooking and jewelry making.

Encouraging Positive Parenting

A lot of our parents haven't seen positive parenting techniques in action, so we try to provide ongoing education and assistance in many formal and informal ways, from hosting parent breakfasts with speakers to identifying troublesome issues. We work with Gesu benefactors, city and state agencies and local organizations such as Cradles to Crayons to provide families with warm clothing and help with utility



Jesuit Father Neil Ver'Schneider, Gesu's chaplain, works with a student in the school's time-out room.

bills, financial crises and other needs.

We also seek and nurture relationships with volunteers and business, community and university leaders. One local organization has arranged for two interns working on their master's degrees in family and individual therapy to spend time with our students, particularly our fifth graders—an age where they're apt to poke and insult each other in a joking way but may not have the impulse control necessary to know when they've gone too far. These interns are showing the children how to pay and accept compliments and how to play and interact with each other without resorting to negativity.

Through our regular classes and recent participation in forensics tournaments, we use public speaking and debate techniques to show children there are multiple sides to issues and that it's OK to disagree in healthy ways. And through our writing enrichment program and journaling in regular classes, we encourage students to express tough emotions instead of acting them out.

Being a faith-based school also gives us extra opportunities to create a moral framework for avoiding violence. During religion classes we discuss what the children are worried about and how they can deal with some of these difficult issues without resorting to violence. Because many of our children are not Catholic, we teach our traditions but also incorporate ones from other religions, emphasizing the com-

mon themes of respect, helping others, having goals for oneself and finding strength through God.

Single-Gender Classes

Giving young African-American males, in particular, the academic tools and self-confidence to reject the lure of the streets is a challenging problem. One way we've attacked that is by instituting single-gender classrooms in the third through fifth grades, which has made a significant difference in keeping our boys in school and on track through graduation. We also inculcate in all of our students pride in their heritage by highlighting African-American accomplishments during morning announcements and by hosting a speaker series, which brings in successful African-American adults with compelling stories to tell.

The speaker program lets our children see there is a bigger world out there with many opportunities and perspectives. Recently students were invited to visit the United Nations and to speak with its director of the Office of the Special Adviser on Africa, Patrick Hayford. Over the years they have also met with such visiting dignitaries as Cardinal Justin Rigali, the late Tim Russert, Israeli Defense Minister and former Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, a renowned photographer and the widow of Arthur Ashe.

By creating a school culture where

children develop self-confidence and have hope for the future, we give them a different world view to replace the tunnel vision that often results from living in a violent neighborhood. When our children are asked what they want to be when they grow up, all hands shoot up excitedly with answers you don't often hear in the inner city: child psychologist, veterinarian, lawyer, pediatrician. Believing a real future lies ahead gives them added reason to protect it by avoiding violence, inside and outside our school.

We also prepare them for that future by encouraging them to reach for the stars in high school and beyond. We help our eighth graders and their parents understand how to complete high school applications and we host high school fairs with many independent, charter and Catholic schools to meet our children and generate interest. Realizing what a special place Gesu is, many of our alumni never really leave us; they return to visit, mentor and give back.

You can hear it first-hand from the children themselves. One of our alumni, Kwadre, tells his own story: "When I arrived at Gesu, I was angry. I used to bully kids and talk back to my teacher. But everyone at Gesu made a big impact on my maturity. They showed me that they cared for me and believed that I could—and would—do something with my life." ●

Sister Patricia McGrenra, IHM, has been with Gesu since 1994, shortly after the former parish school was slated for closure and converted to an independent school by a diverse group of business and community leaders. She holds a bachelor's degree in elementary education and history and a master's degree in counseling psychology. Prior to Gesu she taught elementary and middle school students at schools throughout the Philadelphia region (sisterpat.mcgrenra@gesuschool.org).