

Perceptions of School Safety

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Abstract

As a result of a heightened awareness and increased media coverage regarding school violence, schools across the United States have responded with a focus on school safety. In order for students to learn and for teachers to teach the school environment must be safe. To address concerns regarding school safety, student, teacher, and parent perceptions must be understood and addressed. Research suggests that there are a number of factors that affect student, teacher, and parent perceptions of school safety including personal characteristics, contextual characteristics, processes, and relationships. Determining which factor to address may not be easy to identify, as the decision is dependent on the demographic makeup and the perceptions of school safety held in each specific school and community.

Research Question

What perceptions do students, teachers, and parents hold regarding school safety?

Introduction

A number of violent events across the nation in our public schools have drawn attention to the educational community in regard to school safety. According to recent polls, citizens identified school safety as the most important problem facing the nation's schools (Rose & Gallup, 1999). Working to better understand student, teacher, and parent perception of school safety and what factors affect those decisions must be considered to address this area of concern.

States, districts, and schools have worked to institute numerous plans to improve school safety. Many of the plans implemented include efforts to improve student and staff understanding of the many efforts to enhance safe learning environments. Colgan (2005) identifies a list of factors that are associated with safe schools including strong leadership, team orientation, high quality teachers and community involvement. Even with these efforts schools may not be perceived as safe. As a result a deeper look must be taken to better understand the driving forces that affect student, teacher, and parent perceptions of safety. This research brief will examine what those factors are that affect perceptions of school safety for students, teachers, and parents.

Summary of Findings

Student Perceptions

If students are to be academically successful it is important for them to hold the perception that they are safe while at school. A wide number of factors influence students' perceptions of school safety. Factors can be organized between categories such as personal characteristics, contextual characteristics, processes, and relationships. Any one of these categories may have implications on a student's perceptions of safety.

Between 1989 and 1995, there was an increase in the number of students who feared attack or avoided areas in their school (Kaufman et al., 1999). Previous victimization is a factor that affects students' perceptions of school safety. This may be in part because past events could remind students of past negative experiences. Children with friends who are delinquent also have a heightened sense of being fearful at school. This may be due, in part, because students who spend time with delinquent friends tend to witness crime and abusive behavior (Schreck & Miller, 2003). Environmental factors also have an impact on student perceptions when it comes to safety. The presence of physical or social objects in the area, which alert people to possible criminal victimization, could add to the belief that victimization is likely to happen (Ferraro, 1995).

Additional factors that affect students' perception of school safety include the following: lack of involvement in school, low attachment to school, dislike of or poor relationships with staff, class size, location, grade level, gender make-up of the student

population, which rules are enforced in a fair and firm manner, and the perceived relevance of the curriculum (Sederstrom & Elrod, 2006).

Teacher Perceptions

Teachers play an important role in how safe students believe and perceive they are while in school. For this reason it is important to consider the perceptions teachers hold regarding safety at school. It is expected that teacher and student perception of school safety are affected by many of the same factors. Those factors include personal characteristics, contextual characteristics, processes, and relationships.

While schools remain one of the safest places for young people, school safety continues to be a topic that is covered in the media. If schools are to remain a place where students can learn, schools must better understand and work to address the safety concerns of the people affected. Teachers report that relationships and climate are key factors in making schools safe. Teachers believe that a caring atmosphere in which students and staff hold a positive relationship translates into the perception of a safe environment. Visible teacher presence also helps students feel safe (Bosworth, Ford, & Hernandez, 2006).

It is possible that teachers within the same school have different perceptions of school climate and safety due to the differences in their experiences, perspectives, or roles in their respective school structures (Booren, Handy, & Power, 2011). The perceived safety level of the school organization and the climate of the school appear to have a larger impact students than academic achievement or geographic location. Schools in industrial neighborhoods with high crime levels may be perceived as safe as long as the school has systems in place and those systems are communicated. Safety at a

school that happens to be located in a poor geographic area may be perceived as safe because safety is not left to chance; as long as faculty and administrators actively implement strategies to deal with routine events as well as crisis (Bosworth, Ford, & Hernandez, 2006). Findings suggest that while better socio-economic status may have an impact on the perceptions of school safety, student and staff are more affected by positive school climate that is linked to relationships (Shumow & Lomax).

Parent Perceptions

Parent perceptions of how safe a school is are affected by the same factors influencing students and teachers to include personal characteristics, contextual characteristics, processes, and relationships. Parent perception also may be affected by other factors as well including past experience and view of their own school. The annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll findings have repeatedly suggested that parents view their own schools differently than they do the larger context of public education (Bushaw & Lopez, 2010). To some extent the same is probably true of parent views of a school district – they have judgments that are focused on their experience with the school of their children. However, a school district is the sum of its schools and the climate of a school district is likely to be a product of the total perceptions of parents from the schools.

Contributing Factors to Safe Schools

There are a number of factors that affect school safety including personal characteristics, contextual characteristics, processes, and relationships. All of these factors have implications on student, teacher, and parent perception regarding school safety. Research by Shumow and Lomax (2001) categorizes these areas as the broader

categories affecting perceptions of school safety. The research done has also helped to determine which of these factors have a higher correlation to perceptions of school safety.

Personal characteristics include age and gender. A number of factors, including location of the students and age ranges considered, may affect the perception of safety at school. Research by Shumow and Lomax (2001) suggest that school perceptions are not significantly affected by either age or gender. However, indirect relationships were identified between age and school safety. Age is associated with the level and depth in which a student and teacher may know one another. In addition, older students are exposed to substance abuse, which may affect behavior and ultimately drive perceptions of school safety. Gender did not affect perceptions of school safety (Shumow & Lomax, 2001).

Contextual characteristics include demographic background such as a neighborhood quality, family socio-economic status and ethnic group. When considering contextual characteristics more research should be done to examine school differences to determine more specific recommendations for each school (Soderstrom & Elrod, 2006). It may be believed that students and teachers from lower socio-economic areas would have a perception that school is not safe. However, “this association between neighborhood and school safety does not identify the experiences and relationships that students encounter which result in perceptions of safety” (Shumow & Lowmax, 2006).

Processes include school qualities. School qualities are considered for the extent to which they display order and are educationally focused. Schools with strong processes for order and those that have a shared educational focus would show a tight coupling of school beliefs and values. Having this tight coupling would enhance the overall school

climate. In addition these qualities may predict students' access to relationships with peers and adults (Shumow & Lowmax, 2006).

Relationships include the involvement and relationship between parent, teacher and student. There is evidence that parent-school relations are important factors for fostering safety. Students and parents who perceive that they have or have the opportunity to develop relationships with teachers and peers perceive school to be safe. Students who have teachers that know them and their families would be perceived to feel safer at school. Students who report that they have adults who care about them feel more safe and secure at school than students that do not have the same caring relationship with adults (Shumow & Lomax, 2006).

Implication of the Findings and Application to MOECC

Implication of the Findings

Clearly, perceptions of school safety held by students and teachers are affected by a number of factors. While many districts and schools have made efforts to enhance school safety, leading factors of student and teacher perceptions must be considered when evaluating steps to enhance school safety. Research suggests that personal characteristics such as age and gender do not have a significant impact when determining perceptions of school safety. Contextual characteristics such as neighborhood quality, socio-economic status, and ethnic groups do not significantly affect the perceptions of school safety either. That is, as long as students and parents feel that they have an opportunity to establish relationships at school.

Schools that have strong processes in place tend to have an impact on the perceptions of school safety. Schools that have strong processes for order and those that

have a good educational focus show indications of positive effects regarding student and staff perception of school safety. Schools that focus on establishing strong student-teacher-parent relationships also show signs of positive perceptions of school safety. Research shows that students that have teachers that know them and their families are more likely to perceive school as a safe place.

Application to MOEC

The Metropolitan Omaha Education Consortium (MOEC) has a Student Services Task Force that focuses on many issues including school safety. The consortium is a catalyst for identifying high priority issues common to member organizations and addressing these issues through joint task forces and projects. MOEC provides a forum for professionals from across the educational spectrum and community to share information and work together in the areas of teaching, research, and service. With a focus on school safety MOEC could work with area schools to better meet the safety needs by focusing on characteristics that affect perceptions of school safety. This could be done through training and identifying models to enhance processes and relationships in schools, as both have a strong correlation to enhancing the perception of school safety with students, teachers, and parents.

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