

Ultius, Inc.

Writing Samples

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Discussion of the Issue of School Safety

Given that the children of America spend a great deal of time in schools, it is clear enough why the issue of school safety would be one of paramount importance to the adult generation. The purpose of the present essay is to discuss this issue in further depth. The essay will be organized into four main parts. The first part will consist of a general overview of the issue of school safety. The second part will consider the problem of bullying in light of the issue of school safety. The third part will then turn attention to gun violence, which has become perhaps the primary concern regarding school safety in these times. Finally, the fourth part will reflect on the issue of gun control in light of the issue of school safety, given that discussions regarding these two issues have become more or less inextricably linked with each other in these times.

Overview of the Issue

In the broadest possible terms, school safety refers to students of all ages being able to make it to school, spend the day at school, and then return home from school without experiencing any serious threats to their physical and/or emotional well-being. If a school is unsafe, then this means that this criterion has not been met: that is, it means that students at the school must remain on guard against threats to their holistic well-being, whether this involves the prospect of actual physical violence or more subtle threats such as bullying. When a school undertakes programs and interventions to improve safety, then, this generally means that the

school is attempting to detect and then offset these potential avenues through which harm can come to its students.

According to Lyons, many students—especially at the high school level—feel that safety issues are considerably problematic within their own schools. According to Lyons' report on a Gallup survey, "Teens often mention 'violence, fighting, and school safety,' when asked to name the biggest problem their schools must deal with. Safety issues garnered the most mentions (13%), nearly twice as much as any other specific problem, including lack of funding, overcrowded classrooms, use of drugs and alcohol, and lack of student effort" (paragraph 2). It is possible that students' perceptions in this regard are not fully reflective of objective reality, insofar as other metrics suggest that school violence has on the balance gone down over the course of the years. However, not only must students' perceptions be taken seriously in their own right, it is also clearly the case that the problem of school violence still does very much exist: this can be seen in an irrefutable way in the issues of bullying and gun violence. The present essay will now turn to a consideration of each of these issues in turn.

The Problem of Bullying

Bullying is one of the main ways in which schools become unsafe for students. The Center for Safe Schools has written the following regarding this issue: "In recent years, bullying has gained national attention following research that documents its pervasive negative impact on American youth, including serious health and developmental outcomes. . . . On any given day, nearly 160,000 children in the U.S. miss school due to a fear of being bullied" (paragraph 1). In other words, bullying makes many students across the nation feel so unsafe in school that they simply opt not to go to school altogether. This is clearly unacceptable, and it is a very clear sign that school safety is a very real issue that still needs to be addressed. Moreover, this also suggests

that the line between objective danger and the subjective perception of danger may be fuzzier than one may initially imagine.

Elaborating on the issue of bullying in schools, Gateskill has indicated that developments in technology have given rise to new forms of bullying that make the bullying somewhat harder to combat: "Exacerbating the problem in many schools now is the advancement of electronic forms of communication which are sometimes being used to bully and/or harass in an insidious and sometimes much more harmful way than other forms" (point 4). This form of bullying is often meant to damage or even destroy the social reputation of a given student; and when one is speaking of adolescents, social reputation is of course intimately tied to ego identity itself. Any bullying, and especially bullying of this kind, can cause severe emotional distress for students and prevent students from achieving academic as well as other kinds of success. Moreover, virtual bullying is especially dangerous given that it transcends the school setting per se and can follow the student across all aspects of his life.

It is also worth observing here that bullying can often create and perpetuate a cycle of violence—violence that may begin at the emotional level but then jump to the physical level. For instance, it is well known by now that the perpetrators of the infamous Columbine shooting were primarily motivated to take action due to having been bullied by their peers (Cullen). Indeed, it was this school shooting in the year 1999 that renewed America's general interest in and concern with the problem of bullying in schools. And this is because it showed in no uncertain terms that not only is bullying a subtle way of committing psychological violence against students over time, it can also create a situation and climate in which devastating physical violence becomes much more likely to occur. In this context, it will now be appropriate to turn attention to the issue of gun violence and schools. In these times, when one speaks of school safety, gun violence is

probably the first thing that comes to most people's mind, and there is in fact good reason for this on the basis of recent history.

Gun Violence in Schools

The most egregious example of a lack of school safety in recent memory probably consisted of the massacre of first graders at the school Sandy Hook. This event was so traumatic that the school itself was demolished and a new one built in its place: "The old Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, was demolished after a gunman shot 20 first-graders in December 2012. In its place rose a new school built on the same grounds, but different enough that it wouldn't serve as a reminder of the rampage, and designed to be much safer" (Phippen, paragraph 1). This statement would seem to imply that there are structural and architectural features that could make one school relatively safer than another. However, this still leaves open the troubling issue that it is in fact possible for a person with a gun to enter into a school with malevolent intentions in the first place, or that he would even want to consider doing such a thing.

Several efforts are being taken by schools to address both the general problem of security threats related to guns violence as well as the underlying dynamic that may cause students within the schools themselves to consider engaging in violence action. As Brodsky has written: "School administrators are instituting a wide range of tactics to boost safety, including installing metal detectors and hiring security guards. Schools are also turning to social-reform programs such as those that embrace the restorative-justice model, an approach that emphasizes bringing together the perpetrators and victims of misconduct through meetings and discussions" (paragraph 4). This would thus seem to be a two-pronged strategy, which focuses on the one hand on empirically protecting students from the threat of gun violence and on the other on developing a

broader culture of safety in which the impulse to commit violence would be much less likely to arise in the first place.

The seriousness of the issue of gun violence in schools can perhaps be seen in the fact that preparation for a shooting event has been adopted by several schools as part of their general safety introduction for students. As Saylor has reported of one school: "School safety and crisis management training was held Saturday. Everyone was taught the latest procedures for responding during crisis situations. The superintendent of Haywood County schools says this training has become vital and necessary. . . . This kind of training has been offered since the 1999 shootings at Columbine High School in Colorado" (paragraph 5). Of course, there is something inherently tragic about the fact that students across the nation are now compelled to think about the possibility of a violent gun event happening within their own schools. This calls attention to the fact that America in general now exists in a situation in which this sort of event is seen as not as an exception but rather as a perpetual possibility that must be guarded against with vigilance. Considerations of school safety, then, inevitably tend to dovetail into considerations of gun control.

Reflection on Gun Control

Efforts by schools to address bullying and develop a culture of safety can surely do a great deal to reduce violence and danger that emerge from within the schools themselves. However, the fact still remains that if some external gunman wanted to go on a rampage for whatever reason, then the schools' cultural initiatives will not help them much, and only structural features such as the presence of metal detectors or security guards would really be of help. However, this begs the question: why would a person with such intentions be able to acquire and use a gun in the first place? The issue of school safety thus shades into the macro-

level problem of gun control at the societal level, with the one discussion naturally leading into the other.

In this context, it is worth considering President Obama's passionate appeal for more effective gun control in the aftermath of tragedies such as Sandy Hook: "At a time when [gun] manufacturers are enjoying soaring profits, they should invest in research to make guns smarter and safer . . . And like all industries, gun manufacturers owe it to their customers to be better corporate citizens by selling weapons only to responsible actors" (paragraph 9). The basic point here is that the issue of gun violence in schools, which along with bullying would seem to be the primary threat to school safety in these times, is inextricably linked to the issue of gun control at the societal level. The simple fact is that if more effective gun control were present at the national level, then this would reduce gun violence within America in general and within American schools in particular. Delving into the issue of gun control per se in greater detail would exceed the scope of this essay. For present purposes, the only important point is that these two issues are closely connected in these times.

Conclusion

In summary, the present essay has consisted of a discussion of the issue of school safety. After providing an overview of the issue, the essay turned attention to two of the main contemporary threats to school safety: bullying, and gun violence. Regarding bullying, schools can clearly develop initiatives that are geared toward creating a culture of safety in which all forms of violence would be less likely to occur. Regarding gun violence, though, schools can only do such much through internal initiatives. To be sure, some gun violence, such as the tragic case of Columbine, emerges as the direct result of bullying, with the shooters being students from within the schools themselves. Other gun violence, however, emerges from outside actors,

and the only way to prevent this threat to school safety would be institute sensible gun control policies at the societal level.

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