

Academically Healthy Schools: A Context for Safe Schools

by Christine J. Villani and Colin C. Ward

"The last several years there has been a lot of shootings in schools around the United States. Schools were once a very safe place to go, but now kids are scared to go to school everyday because of the possibility of a fellow student going on a shooting rampage..."

—Dan Aront, Grade 10

The rate of violent acts committed by juveniles is reaching epidemic proportions. In 1998, youths accounted for one of six arrests for all violent crimes with an increase of 70 percent across each level from ages 14 to 17 (Snyder and Sickmund, 1999). A common motive for these crimes related to interpersonal disputes with others—i.e., peers, school faculty, family (Kachur, Stennies, Powell, Modzeleski, Stephans, Murphy, Kresnow, Sleet and Lowry, 1996). Furthermore, studies reveal that students are more fearful about being attacked or harmed at school than ever before (Kaufman, Chen, Choy and Chandler, 1998).

Often-normal conditions of adolescence, such as hypervigilance, timidity in expressing an opinion, inability to set goals, and acting-out behaviors, are factors associated with children and adolescents predisposed to aggressive tendencies (Studer, 1996). These young individuals tend to fear strange places and experience difficulty taking risks and establishing goals. They struggle to feel good about themselves, unable to predict positive outcomes in the activities occurring around them and, most important, perceiving

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themselves as distant and apart from peers and adults alike. With the additional impact of two predominant systems, the family and the media,

Teasing

I am different from the rest of my class. I don't like rap and I love to read. My main difference is that I like school. I am often the subject of jokes and rumors. I am called weird on a daily basis. My classmates don't realize that I am not weird, just different. All of this doesn't bother me. Whenever I get picked on I just do a math problem or think about today's science class. I am often called names like Miss Perfect but it doesn't bother me. I just don't listen.

Violence in schools scares me. I've heard that the kids who shoot their own classmates and stuff are the ones who get teased. I'm teased, but I would never do anything like that. If kids would just show a little friendship then things like this would happen much less.

Teachers don't realize how much teasing goes on in schools. They can't be expected to. Teasing can start with something as small as a hurtful joke and escalate into a school shooting. Most teasing doesn't but some will. As harmless as it seems, teasing must be stopped.

—Elly P.
Grade 6
Kentucky

Untitled

The amount of school violence is rising. Between bombs, guns, knives etc. students are getting killed. It's a shame because schools are supposed to be one of the safest places to be. Parents have to be scared to send their children to school everyday. Schools are supposed to be a learning, not a violent place. I really think schools should look into new ways to protect students and staff.

—*Sherrie Lattanzio*
Grade 10
New Jersey

influencing the development of such characteristics, the school community becomes a microcosm where children and adolescents struggle to identify with themselves and others. In addition to the already-overwhelming pressures placed on schools to address the academic needs of students, schools must find a way to reach these children of trauma.

The community of educators desperately needs an academic environment that promotes self-esteem and self-efficacy in students. Our contention is that a majority of today's schools are academically unhealthy and unable to either recognize or address the dynamics inherent in school-related aggression and violence. Many schools are implementing programs as preventive measures to reduce violence. Schools have included conflict-resolution and peer-mediation programs in their curricula. They have developed "drug free," "gun free," and "fight free" policies. In addition, they have raised their expectations regarding behavior, warning students that violence not only is unacceptable but has serious consequences. Yet even with such intervention programs in place, violence is still on the rise.

School-intervention programs ignore important considerations. Every member of a school community should be responsible for reducing violence and for determining whether the school is academically healthy. Such an approach could represent a new paradigm that empowers children with opportunities for emotional and social growth instead of violence, drug use, and gang membership.

The new approach also implicitly demands that schools remove obstacles and provide students opportunities for change, learning, and problem solving. Furthermore, it establishes a trusting and supportive social atmosphere for the change and developmental growth of everyone. The essence of empowerment, therefore, is collaboration, commitment, and trust in the goals pursued by students, faculty, and administration.

Although violence in schools can be viewed as an extension of social forces related to the overall increase of youth violence nationwide, a systemic paradigm focused on increasing the academic health of schools can provide a preventive rather than a merely reactive learning environment. The ultimate goal of schools is clearly academic success achieved in a safe environment that promotes the self-esteem and self-efficacy of all students. However, many schools continue to respond reactively, relying on standardized tests, which then drive the curriculum; tracking students in a linear fashion that offers no hope of movement; and creating institutional environments that serve as fertile ground for bullying, discrimination, racism, sexism, and policing. Such schools are static, failing organizations mired in past practice and tied to piecemeal, reactive interventions, not dynamic organizations that work toward holistic, systemic reform. More critically, they have become places where children fear for their safety.

In addition, the ultimate goal of school leaders is to promote the professional development of all faculty in a safe environment. By and large, however, teachers are sidelined and their needs are seldom met. Schools show little understanding of adult development and a lack of effective supervision; the current climate has led many teachers to feel disrespected, unappreciated, frustrated, and fearful of potential harm.

Academically Healthy Schools

We need to create safe and healthy school communities that comprehensively provide for the needs of all who live within their walls. Creating academically healthy schools is the aim of the Synthesized Professional Supervision Model (SPSM), which establishes supervision of the whole school community. In order to embrace such a model of supervision, one first needs to understand the concepts that underlie academically healthy schools. Academically healthy schools:

No Rights

You have the right to remain silent.
Whatever you say really doesn't matter.
You have no decision upon your own
benefit.
Anything you do will not make me
proud.
You have no rights to express your
opinion.
If you have any objections, you will be
punished.
Upon your punishment, you will have nei-
ther pity nor love
From me nor anyone.
If you do not obey these laws, you will
be kicked out.
Now, any questions?

—Tracey N.
Grade 9
Mississippi

Represent the emotional, academic, familial, cultural, and administrative processes related to the student's experiences. These dynamics are reflected in the mission, values, and relationships that emphasize how the curriculum is implemented as much as what the curriculum is. Additionally, academic health is founded on the interdependent nature of learning, emphasizing an open rather than a closed educational environment (Villani and Ward, 2001).

Support ongoing collaborative processes between and among administrators, faculty, staff, students, and parents. This environment demands developing superior communication skills and interpersonal relationships. Mutual trust must be established in a climate of fairness and integrity that allows for creativity and risk taking on the part of all members of the school community.

Foster behaviors that indicate positive attitudes and enthusiasm toward peers, faculty, staff, administrators, and academic pursuits. Faculty, staff, administrators, and parents are also encouraged to exhibit positive attitudes toward one another, students, and the community at large.

Encourage students to achieve to their highest potential, develop a sense of self, and demon-

strate their knowledge, skills, and processes through various means of assessment. By extension, faculty, staff, administrators, and parents are involved in the ongoing process of curriculum development, instruction, and assessment. Community members are encouraged and enlisted to support these endeavors (Villani and Ward, 2001).

Embody the familial, academic, cultural, and administrative processes through a synthesized model of supervision that meets the needs of all its members. A school's ability to effectively promote student and adult learning, self-growth, and a safe, nonviolent environment depends on such dynamics, supported by a holistic model of supervision that promotes the development of academically healthy schools.

Represent critically self-reflective learning environments that are concerned with consistent and responsive proactive reform. To support such environments, schools must continually reflect on:

- Whether students exhibit behaviors that indicate positive attitudes and enthusiasm toward teachers, peers, family, and academic pursuits
- Whether staff exhibits behaviors that indicate positive attitudes and enthusiasm toward students, peers, parents, and professional pursuits
- Who the children of trauma are in the school
- Whether the school utilizes a fluid model of supervision for all members of the school community
- The level of trust in the school
- Whether the steps of change the school will need to take in order to become academically healthy are available (Villani and Ward, 2001)

Creating a Healthy Academic Environment

School violence is an extreme extension of unhealthy academic environments. Children who arrive at school fearing for their safety are unable to learn; as a result the learning process becomes difficult and at times unproductive. Schools can no longer be concerned with just the content of the academic areas and standardized assessment; they need to focus on creating healthy environments. Academically healthy schools create environments where every member of the school community is growing intellectually, psychologically, physically, and spiritually. Schools need to

Untitled

Some kids are scared in school
and some can't relax
I just try not to think about the violence
and I try to sit back
But you can't really blame the scared ones
with all the shootings and threats
They don't know what could happen
No one knows what to expect
Clear backpacks and metal detectors
they're supposed to keep the guns out
But truthfully they just scare us more
and the guns still get in some way, somehow
So really there's no way to stop this
unless we're all locked in cages
We just have to hope it never happens again
until these kids stop their rampages.

—Megan Webner
Grade 10
New Jersey

embody the systemic qualities representative of such schools. Empowered by healthy environments, all members of the school can feel safe, secure, and cared for. Recognizing the interconnected nature of an environment—the way in which all members of a learning community influence one another—can help schools understand the need to adopt a new paradigm to empower the emotional, psychological, familial-cultural, and academic-professional dynamics of change that comprise academic health.

It is by working within this interdependent interaction, rather than ignoring it, that academic health can be achieved. Toinette Eugene (1989) articulated that the attitude of care liberates individuals from the fear that others will use gross power to seize what they want. Leadership and supervision, therefore, needs to liberate all people in the school setting. Then they can not only trust one another but understand that being cared for may promote learning to care. As articulated by Noddings (1991):

Schools by themselves cannot do much to remove the crisis, but educators can begin to address the fundamental problem instead of aggravating it by promoting technical and mechanistic solutions.

It may be impossible for regular schools to provide the sort of care required by children who have never experienced caring relations, but schools can help most children to learn more about how to care and be cared for, and our society ought to make education for caring a top priority (p. 166).

The Synthesized Professional Supervision Model (SPSM)

Caring, trust, connectivity, respect, and empowerment are the cornerstones of academic health. Creating academically healthy schools is possible, but it is not a quick-fix, one-shot program. It requires commitment to a strategic and systemic response. The Synthesized Professional Supervision Model establishes an approach that extends the concept of positive supervision to the whole school community.

The following interactive paradigms of the SPSM model contend that the academic health of students occurs not in isolation from, but in concert with, one another. It is a model of supervision for understanding how effective learning interactions occur between administrators and faculty, administrators and students, and faculty and students. The paradigms of reflectivity, learning style, pedagogy, and multiculturalism define the purpose of these interactions while presenting a framework for caring supervisory relationships that can enhance both professional development and the academic health of school settings. As outlined in Figure 1, these four paradigms of influence articulate how a reflective dialogue, guided by a supervisor with deliberate pedagogical intent that matches the learning style and multicultural worldview of supervisees, can enhance the ability to “make sense” of the productive professional relationships within the learning community (i.e., peers, students, and parents).

It is important to acknowledge that in creating academically healthy schools, the SPSM does not rest solely on school leaders but also with all members of the school community (teachers, parents, and students). The perspectives of teachers and students regarding their school environment are critical and imperative to the successful implementation of the SPSM.

One-dimensional policies such as policing schools or establishing ever-broadening interpretations of “zero tolerance” do not solve school vio-

Figure 1
The Synthesized Professional Supervision Model

Supervisory Reflective Cycle of Professional Interaction	Supervisee Stages of Professional Development	Paradigms Influencing Professional Practice	Phases of Professional Supervision
<p>Disorienting Counseling Experience</p> <p>Supervisee is anxious with a perceived sense of professional inadequacy.</p> <p align="center">↓</p>	<p>SELF CENTERED</p> <p>High levels of anxiety associated with performance and evaluation anxiety leading to patterns of <i>dependency</i> on supervisor.</p> <p align="center">↓</p>	<p>REFLECTIVITY PARADIGM</p> <p align="center">↕</p>	<p>CONTEXTUAL ORIENTATION</p> <p>Supervisee experiences cognitive and emotional dissonance in adjustment to the professional climate.</p> <p align="center">↓</p>
<p>Supervision Relationship</p> <p>Supervisor is nonjudgmental, supportive, and validating.</p> <p align="center">↓</p>	<p>CLIENT CENTERED</p> <p>Fluctuation between dependence and autonomy; and between over-confidence and being overwhelmed.</p> <p align="center">↓</p>	<p>LEARNING STYLE PARADIGM</p> <p align="center">↕</p>	<p>ESTABLISHING TRUST</p> <p>Developing a positive learning alliance is central for a supervisee's willingness to reflect on dissonant professional experiences.</p> <p align="center">↓</p>
<p>Supervisor Intervention</p> <p>Supervisor seeks to expand supervisee conceptual complexity to promote clinical independence.</p> <p align="center">↓</p>	<p>PROCESS CENTERED</p> <p>Exhibits increased professional self-confidence, with increased insight beyond specific skills, and in observing thematic patterns.</p> <p align="center">↓</p>	<p>CULTURAL PARADIGM</p> <p align="center">↕</p>	<p>CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT</p> <p>Promoting advanced conceptual complexity through reflective dialogue and questioning.</p> <p align="center">↓</p>
<p>Shift in Supervisee Perception and/or Behavior and Reemergence to the Counseling Context</p> <p>Supervisee links supervision experience to clientele/context.</p>	<p>CONTEXT CENTERED</p> <p>Trainee has developed into an integrated practitioner characterized by personal autonomy, insightful awareness, personal security, stable motivation and awareness.</p>	<p>PEDAGOGY PARADIGM</p> <p align="center">↕</p>	<p>CLINICAL INDEPENDENCE</p> <p>Engendering supervisee autonomy and self-assessment processes.</p>

lence. Stand-alone programs that target “trouble-makers” or “victims” will not create safe learning environments. Again, the solution does not lie in linear cause-effect analysis and reactive response. When we come to the point that our reactionary policies result in suspending a child for having a nail clipper on a key chain or a water pistol in school, then we are creating an unhealthy and disempowering environment—not a safe one. If we hope to solve complex problems we need to be proactive, respond holistically, and acknowledge the complexities inherent in human society.

The Synthesized Professional Supervision Model is complex, but so are the problems manifested in schools today. The complexity of the SPSM addresses the multifaceted dynamics of human relationships that influence learning. In addressing school violence the SPSM reminds us that school violence only reflects kids and their relationship to the micro society that our schools form. As such, all members of the school community have a responsibility to change the unhealthy environments that are promoting violence. However complex the SPSM appears, its message is a simple one: understand the dynamics of all, supervise based on these dynamics, and academically healthy schools with outcomes that transcend mere academic content will develop. School violence will dissipate like an unexpected storm once

a connected, vigilant learning community—one that values academically healthy schools—erects a safe and sturdy shelter for its students.

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