

RISING VIOLENCE IN THE NYC SCHOOLS

The New York Post

April 22, 2008 -- EVERY spring, we see a rise in school-safety incidents - but this year seems different. In the past month, there have been at least 15 reported incidents of violence or threats of violence in city public schools - and at all levels (elementary, intermediate and high school). And these are just the reported incidents. No one knows how many go unreported, as schools try to avoid getting a bad reputation. The recent incidents include:

- * A stabbing that left a student paralyzed.
- * Another stabbing that left a student with a huge gash in his leg.
- * Four confirmed incidents in which students brought loaded guns to school.
- * Three cases where guns were brought to schools and seen by other students but couldn't be found by police.
- * A student shot in his stomach near his school.
- * Two teachers assaulted so badly they had to be hospitalized.
- * A student who used a pen as a stabbing weapon to defend herself against a classroom attack by eight student intruders.
- * Teachers running for cover into an elementary school as a gunman ran past firing shots at a group of fleeing men.
- * A "prank" in which four students claimed to have guns.

Such incidents traumatize fellow students, educators and parents. They often lead to a school lockdown or evacuation while police and other authorities search for weapons. How can real education occur in the wake of such behavior?

No hard data are readily available to determine if things are worse this year than in years past, but such anecdotal reports suggest that school violence is on the rise. These cases have educators worried that conditions are primed for it to get worse. We need to take steps to prepare for what could very well be a growing dilemma.

These are difficult problems, not solved simply by considering more metal detectors - although they may be needed in some schools. They require comprehensive, system-wide solutions.

Students and educators can benefit from better compliance with school discipline codes as well as more school services tailored to address the causes of violence. The Council for Unity, for one, has a great track record of working with gang members to help teach them how to resolve

conflicts without violence and providing students in schools across the city with guidance in mediation.

Guidance counselors, school social workers and school psychologists also need more time to spend focusing on students' academic problems and emotional concerns.

And art, music, civics and science education - as well as after-school tutoring, extracurricular activities and sports programs - are also essential as productive outlets for students. Schooling must be more than math and English.

Finally, we have to be mindful that our students are feeling more pressure at school and home. Since the first week of April, at least three students (one, a sixth grader) have committed suicide away from schools.

When we started seeing this school-violence trend, the United Federation of Teachers (which represents the city's 100,000 public-school educators) called on City Hall and the Department of Education for a citywide school-safety summit to address the problem. So far, that call has gone unheeded.

We want to make sure that everyone with a stake in the success of our public schools takes the collective responsibility to make them safe havens from violence and bullying. That requires taking action now, including planning for the new school year starting in September and exposing, not hiding, the full extent of these problems.

Safety issues can't be solved by individual teachers or their union. It is crucial that, in coming weeks, the city administration work with us in making our kids' safety the highest priority.

Randi Weingarten is president of the United Federation of Teachers.