

REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

YOUTH FORUM: “LOCKDOWN ON SCHOOL VIOLENCE”

September 29, 2008
Fresno, CA

Presented By:

the kNOw youth media

<http://theknowfresno.blogspot.com>

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On September 29, 2008, The kNOw Youth Media held a forum, “Lockdown On School Violence,” at Edison Computech Middle School. Over 100 community members, elected officials, and students attended.

During the past year, students throughout the Fresno, CA area experienced a series of school lockdowns provoked by youth violence:

- April 16, 2008: a student at Roosevelt High School attacked an on-campus officer and was shot and killed by the officer.
- May 5, 2008: four teens were arrested behind Tioga Middle School for firing a gun that went off during a fight.
- June 4, 2008: three Bullard High students were arrested after a stabbing incident where they made pacts to stab each other.

These incidents garnered local and national media attention and caused alarm among students and parents. As a youth media organization, The kNOw saw the importance of having a forum where students can come together to dialogue and strategize on how they can work with school staff and district leaders to foster a safe learning environment for everyone.

The kNOw is an after school media program led by a group of 16 youth who produce media (video, magazine, photography) as a way to express ideas/creativity, talk about community issues, and provide themselves and their peers with a chance to build a youth-driven voice in the Central Valley. The majority of The kNOw youth live in West Fresno, are in high school, and reflect the cultural diversity of their communities (African American, Hispanic, Southeast Asian).

Ironically, and sadly, on the day of the forum, a 15-year-old boy was stabbed to death at Lafayette Park by a group of youth. The stabbing was provoked by an argument. In this context, the forum reiterated that youth violence is not just happening in schools, it’s happening everywhere in the community—in streets, parks, and neighborhoods. As a first step, the forum sought to give young people a chance to talk about school violence/safety issues with each other as a means to begin identifying solutions. The kNOw believes the task of creating safer schools does not lie only in the hands of school staff and district leaders, but it also lies in the hands of youth/students and community members. Everyone can play a role to help make schools safer.

The Forum

The forum began with a panel discussion with two students (Edison High School graduate Kevis McGee and junior Paige Mason) and two adults (Fresno Unified School District Individual Trustee Member Carol Mills and Edison High School teacher Chris Finley). Following the panel, youth were given remote control “clickers” to participate in live polling on questions related to school violence/safety. After the polling session, youth broke into small discussion groups, moderated by The kNOw’s trained youth facilitators, to talk about the meaning of the poll results.

Among the 52 youth participants polled (61% female, 39% male), 42% said they had

started a fight, and 35% said they had been a victim of violence at school. An overwhelming 94% had witnessed at least one fight at school, and 33% had witnessed more than five fights. Only 37% said they had ever tried to stop a fight – and we learned in the breakout discussions that most students don't try to intervene in fights because they don't want to get hurt, or they don't want to get accused by school staff for somehow being involved in the fight.

Polling Highlights & Action Steps/Recommendations:

The following recommendations are provided to school leaders (school board members, administrators, teachers, and other staff/educators), and were drawn directly from the polling results, breakout discussion, and opinions of The kNOw youth members.

- 76% of participants cited rumors/gossip as the primary cause of fights – contrary to the stereotype that gangs are the primary cause.
Recommendations:
 - *Provide more conflict mediation and communication training to students so they understand how messages can become distorted and lead to misconceptions.*
 - *Engage student leaders in defining a school culture that cuts down on problematic gossip and negative inter-school rivalries.*

- 74% of participants agreed that bullying is a cause of school violence.
Recommendation:
 - *Instead of suspending students who get into fights or students who bully others, offer those students counseling with a consistent adult who can be trusted. Counseling can help to understand that student's life/family situation and help build self-esteem/confidence to promote more positive interaction with other students.*

- 41% of participants said talking to their peers and other students would help them best grieve if someone were to die at their school from a school violence incident.
Recommendation:
 - *Expand peer-counseling programs that train students in mentoring and conflict mediation.*

- Only 11% of participants felt that their school officials/staff were doing a good job of handling fights. 43% of participants agreed that when a fight breaks out, no adult arrives to the scene usually for a while. Also, 86% of participants cited they had witnessed a verbal fight between a student and teacher, and 40% had witnessed a physical fight.
Recommendations:
 - *Provide more training opportunities and staff development for teachers and Campus Assistants so they feel better prepared to handle fights.*

- 33% of participants agreed that keeping students busy doing other fun stuff would decrease the amount of school fights.
Recommendations:

- *Keep students busy with activities that involve creativity such as art, media, graphic design or activities that build teamwork and leadership skills. Start these activities in elementary school and continue them through middle and high school.*
- *Tension between racial/ethnic groups can lead to fights. Create more opportunities for students to build cross-cultural understanding to reduce cultural stereotypes, misconceptions and racist attitudes.*
- 35% said they don't know their school's rule on disciplinary action, and only 20% said they fully agree with those rules.
Recommendation:
 - *Teachers or school officials need to take a more active role in explaining and clarifying the policy to students.*
- Only 8% of participants said they would seek help if they saw a fight break out and most participants during the small group discussion did not know about Crime Stoppers, a telephone hotline that allows callers to pass on anonymous crime tips.
Recommendations:
 - *Once a fight is planned it spreads quickly through word of mouth and text messaging. Use students' strong communication networks as a resource for stopping fights before or after they start.*
 - *School officials should promote the Crime Stoppers anonymous reporting program. Most students don't want to openly "snitch" on other students. Students should be given an easy way to text message information to Crime Stoppers.*

Thank You

The kNOW's forum on youth violence was made possible with a wide range of community support. Thank you especially to Edison Computech Middle School Principal Jeremy Ward for allowing us to use its cafeteria space. The location for the forum was selected largely due to its accessibility and location to young people in the community. This school has had few, if any, issues with school violence, and it was important to hold this event in a safe, familiar space. Thanks also to Bard DeVore of Edison High School; Jamillah Finley of Roosevelt High School; Ellie Honardoost of Fresno High School; Cathryn Dossetti of Fresno High School; Fresno County Public Library, Teen Services; Fresno Unified School District, Civic Center; Fresno Unified School District, Susan Bedi; Victor Salazar, Fresno County Elections Office and Peter Chhan and his band. Special thanks to Next 10 and Bruce Aumont from Audience Response Systems for providing the live polling tools!

For more information on The kNOW Youth Media or this report, contact The kNOW's Youth Media Coordinator, Mai Der Vang at mvang@newamericamedia.org or log on to <http://theknowfresno.blogspot.com>.