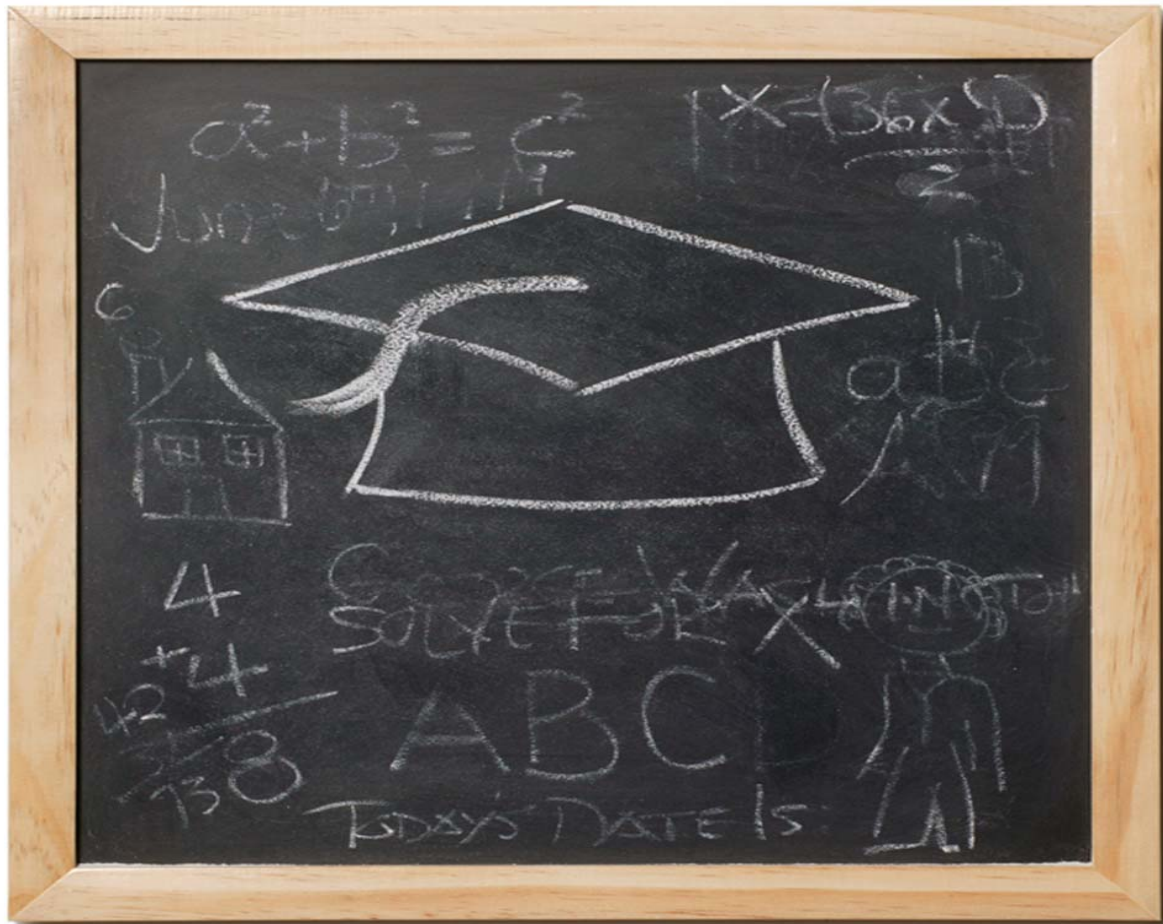


***Cultivating Expectations for Excellence:
Creating and Sustaining Safe School Environments
In Camden City Schools***



Safe Schools Violence Prevention Focus Group Report

Dr. Lauren Hill

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Event Sponsor:

Education Law Center-Camden Initiative

Event Partners:

Camden Education Association & New Jersey Education Association

Cultivating Expectations for Excellence: Creating & Sustaining Safe School Environments

Introduction

The Safe Schools/Violence Prevention Focus Group event was planned as a follow-up activity to a March 29, 2008 Community Engagement Forum: Educating Children in a Violence-Free School. The Community Engagement Forum was sponsored by The Camden Mayor's Office, Camden Board of Education, Camden Education Association, and the New Jersey Education Association. The March 2008 Forum focused on increasing awareness of school/community violence in an effort to develop community strategies to address school safety and violence prevention.

Increasing efforts that address issues of secondary students (grades 6 through 12) is one of Education Law Center – Camden Initiative's priorities. The planning process to create an opportunity to access the voices of key stakeholders via focus group sessions began in September 2008. Specifically, middle and high school students, parents, school law enforcement officers, and certified school personnel were our targeted participants for this activity. The purpose of the focus group activity was to better understand stakeholders' feelings and concerns regarding school violence and to generate potential ways to build and sustain safe schools. The New Jersey Education Association and Camden Education Association collaborated with this event given their common interests in fostering safe school environments for students and staff. Further, we share common goals to increase awareness, and to hear the voices and experiences of individuals in the public education community.

During the planning stages several documents were examined to determine current research findings regarding school violence, especially in urban districts. One document that was extensively examined was, *Where We Teach: The CUBE Survey of Urban School Climate*, by Brian K. Perkins. Perkins indicated that "school is one of the most important institutions in children's lives. It is where they spend approximately three-fourth of the conscious part of their weekdays, and where they formulate habits for success later in life." Further, he reminds us that "the school climate – impressions, beliefs, and expectations about a school as a learning environment – plays a critical role in the academic development of the student learner, and administrators and teachers clearly strongly influence that impression. This is especially true in urban schools."

Event Summary

Safe School/Violence Prevention Focus Group brought together approximately 50 participants in the four targeted populations. Each group responded to questions derived by Dr. Farrell, Professor, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, based on his safe schools and violence prevention research and resources. The online document, *Where We Teach* provided useful background information of recent survey findings of urban districts regarding school safety and violence.

Facilitators for the focus groups included Joyce Beverly-Scott, NJEA UniServe Representative and Yulanda Haddix, Special Education Teacher, YES Shelter, Center for Family Services led

the discussion with school law enforcement officers. Nyeema Watson, Associate Director, Rutgers – Center for Children and Childhood Studies guided the students’ discussion. Dr. Walter Farrell, Jr., Professor, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill led the certified school staff members’ dialogue. Lastly, Dr. Lauren Hill, Project Director, Education Law Center guided the parents’ discussion. Participant responses to our program evaluation tallied 4.5, where 5 was the highest rating.

Focus Group Questions & Response Summary

Students:

Morning Session

Question #1 – Have you ever been threatened or bullied by students while in school: Do you feel safe in your school?

Many of the participating students experienced or witnessed threats and bullying at their schools. However, one student stated these activities were not likely to occur at Met East. Some students felt safe because of their friendships, while others did not feel safe, indicating that gangs and gang activity are pervasive in their schools. Additionally, one student shared that some students feel unsafe because people who don’t go to the school who wear any school color shirt can get into the building.

Question #2 – Have you ever carried anything to school to protect yourself: If so, explain what it was and why you did?

None of the students indicated they carried weapons to school. However, some were aware that their friends have carried weapons to school. Weapons may not be discovered when students go around metal detectors; sometimes weapons are stashed outside of school and later retrieve by students.

Question #3 – Have you seen students in your classes curse at teachers, show them disrespect, hassle them, or do the same to other school personnel and fellow students? Explain?

Students have seen fellow students curse and disrespect teachers. One student’s reaction, “like a everyday thing”. Further, a student indicated that some teachers curse and disrespect students also.

Question #4 – Do you feel the teachers, administrators and other staff, and school law enforcement officers show respect to students at your school? Why or Why not?

Some students indicated that some teachers and school law enforcement officers are okay, trustworthy, and personable, but are still disrespected by students. Students shared that teachers are physically attacked by students. Conversely, some students indicated that some teachers give answers and don’t challenge students academically and that some school law enforcement officers are not trustworthy and behave inappropriately.

Afternoon Session

Question #1 – From your perspective, what are the reasons why students fight students and teachers, bring weapons to school, bring drugs to sell or use at school, and cause disruptions in school?

Some participants indicated that fellow students who fight are bored and have low aspirations. Students shared that some fellow students carry weapons to feel safe and to scare others. Lastly, participants stated that some students sell drugs because they want fast and easy money or their families need money.

Question #2 – Has violence at school (fights, weapons, student-teacher conflicts, vandalism, bullying, and drugs) affected your ability to learn, interfered with the teachers' ability to teach, or affected your ability to develop positive relationships with other students and school personnel?

Students stated that when teachers have to stop to get someone out of the class it slows up the learning process. In some cases, teachers will continue teaching if things go on in the back of the class.

Question #3 – To your knowledge, have there been situations that have occurred in the community that turned into arguments, fights, drug use/drug dealing, or bullying at school? Explain without using names.

Some students indicated that outside incidents and arguments contribute to fights inside the school. Fights can happen from little things like stepping on people's shoes or bumping into people. Some students fight over school supplies.

Question #4 – If you were the principal of your school, what would you do to keep students from fighting, bringing weapons to school, cursing, disrespecting, and defying teachers?

Student participants indicated that they would interview and screen students and staff. Use an entrance exam to separate good and bad students, problem students would be let go. They would establish a school for at-risk students and students that can't be in class with other students. School and teachers would be stricter. Teachers would be disciplined and principals would interact with students and teachers. Students felt that schools have enough school law enforcement officers, but they are not placed properly. Lastly, one student stated "get rid of all teachers, security guards, and administration and start over".

Parents:

Morning Session

Question #1 – Do you feel that your child's school is safe overall?

Some parents felt their children's school was not safe due to inoperable metal detectors, lack of compliance with school policies by some students, and because of students' fear and pressure to conform increase violence among students. Other parents indicated that their children's schools are safe, but realize some students bring violence into the school. All parents felt that parents need to be more involved with their children's education.

Question #2 - Has your child been involved in or a victim of any fights, bullying, vandalism, weapons possession/use, and drugs while in school? If involved in any of the above, have there been any health costs to your family? Explain.

Parents stated that the use of technology contributes to fights and bullying when used to spread rumors and to alter fellow students' My Space accounts. One parent of a high school student indicated that her child has been bullied since elementary school.

Question #3 – Do you feel that the central administration of the Camden City Schools is doing everything that it can do to reduce school violence with the budget it has?

Parents indicated that there was a lack of communication from the central administration and from some schools. However, some principals are proactive, monitor students' activities and communication flows between the school and home. Parents felt there is a systemic failure to manage truancy cases which results in unresolved conflicts and tensions and believed that school security has been reduced due to budgetary cuts.

Question #4 – Have the school staff and administrators shown you respect when you have attended meetings or visited the school your child attends or attended?

Parents indicated they get respect from administrators and students at their children's schools.

Afternoon Session

Question #1 – From your perspective, what are the major causes of violence (fights, weapons, students-teacher conflicts, vandalism, bullying, and drugs) in the Camden City Schools?

Parents indicated that there are many factors that cause violence in the schools including, peer pressure, lack of parental supervision, lack of communication among parents, students, and teachers, tensions driven by male and female relationships, and the lack of respect for peers and educators. Further, parents shared that other influences also support acts of violence, cultural differences, the drug culture, modeling of violent behavior from outside sources, and a general need to emphasize unifying all students when resolving conflicts.

Question #2 – Do you feel that violence in the schools is affecting your child's ability to learn, the teachers' ability to teach, and your child's ability to develop positive relationships with his/her peers and school staff? Explain.

Parents indicated that when students begin to feel unsafe they are less focused on learning. Further, parents shared that some teachers are often unwilling to confront issues due to passivity or fear of retaliation from students. Many times teachers are distracted from teaching while exercising vigilance.

Question #3 – In your view, does the violence in the broader Camden community have any impact on the violence in the Camden City Schools?

All parents stated that violence in the larger community impacts and contributes to incidents of violence in the schools.

Question #4 – If you were in charge of the Camden City Schools, what would you do to reduce violence (fights, weapons, student-teacher conflicts, vandalism, bullying, and drugs)?

Parents offered many recommendations for reducing violence in schools, among the most strongly encouraged were the need for better communication and accountability among all parties. Parents indicated the importance of programs that increase problem solving and conflict resolution skills, address drug and alcohol use, and enforce local ordinances that prevent truancy. Parents stated that the current suspension policies need to be revised; there should be in-house suspension that provides education and counseling to students. Lastly, parents shared that parents and stakeholders must be informed about state laws and policies. They believe it is

important to know how to advocate on their own behalf and participate in making necessary changes.

School Law Enforcement Officers:

Morning Session

Question #1 – How would you rate (on a scale of 1 to 5, 5 being the worst) the level of violence (fights, weapons, student-teacher conflicts, vandalism, bullying, and drugs) at your school? Explain.

Participants who indicated a rating of 5 stated that violence is recorded on video tape, and reports are generated, but the process is watered down by the administration. Some administrators deny there is a problem; school law enforcement expressed concern about their own safety. There is a revolving door of excuses which means that schools deal with the same disruptive students for years. Classroom management and effective teaching are important for children to learn. The drug culture which offers quick money often leads to problems with the judicial system with long term implications for youth. Some home environments and lack of parent responsibility foster these inappropriate behaviors. Some parents are enablers; they don't want to hear how to help their children, children don't follow rules in the homes, schools, or elsewhere. Participants who indicated a rating of 5 believed bullying is the first step and starts in kindergarten in some cases. One participant awarded a rating of 20 for Camden High School.

Question #2 – Do the students involved in violent incidents that you have had contact with in the Camden City Schools—in which you have worked—have any special characteristics that distinguishes them from other students? Explain.

In a few cases parents were perpetrators of violent acts at school. One school law enforcement officer recalled, one parent jumped out of her car and wanted to fight the officer and challenge the authority of the officer. Parents and other family members have jumped a student. These incidents demonstrate that some parents' behavior is inappropriate and aggressive as well. Further, school law enforcement officers indicated that some administrators observe violent incidents, but are reluctant to recognize and support the efforts of the officers. Many special education students are perpetrators of violence.

Question #3 – In your view, what are the most frequent incidents of violence in your school and in the Camden City Schools, in general? Rank and explain them.

Participants shared that family issues including, drug activity, drinking, and disrespect leads to many violent issues. Fighting and gang activity are most common incidents. In addition, school law enforcement officers shared that inclusion of classified students is a huge problem, indicating that some parents are looking for money through the classification of their children.

Question #4 – How do you view the level of respect between students and students, teachers and students, students and administrators, students and other school staff, students and school law enforcement officers, parents and school personnel –both ways- at your school? Explain.

Many school law enforcement officers indicated that a high level of disrespect occurs in schools. They felt that when disrespectful behavior is not addressed students spiral out of control to drugs, weapons, and violence. Parents are often disrespectful to school staff. Some parents are afraid of their children, some parents don't teach or demand respect from their children, and

there are no consequences for bad behavior. This is especially the case when the students are taking care of parents financially, this relationship undermines respect. A school law enforcement officer added, “when you meet the parents you understand why the kids are the way they are”. Another school law enforcement officer stated, “we are in survival mode”. Respect is also hampered by low reporting of violence in order to receive funding and enforcement of school policies governing students, especially if students are dropped from the rolls. Ernie’s (local store) is a problem location because students leave school and jump the fence to go to the store. Students have been jumped and injured at Ernie’s.

Afternoon Session

Question # 1 – Do you feel that violence is affecting the teaching and learning environment for teachers and students, respectively, at your school?

School law enforcement officers felt that teaching and learning are impacted by violence and bullying. They shared that parents are a part of the problem, due to lack of involvement and lack of parental responsibility for their children. Adjudicated students create lots of issues; these students know the system and there are inadequate supports to address their needs. Further, some teachers are scared, reluctant to document incidents, and overlook inappropriate behavior in their classrooms. School law enforcement officers indicated that they are often viewed as confrontational and are thrown under the bus when not supported by administrators when an incident occurs.

Question #2 – In your view, what impact does the broader Camden community have on violent incidents in your school and in the Camden City Schools, in general, if any? Explain.

School law enforcement officers view violence as pervasive. They shared comments regarding some students strong alarming fellow students as a large problem, while other students are selling protection for money.

Question #3 – Based on your experience in the Camden City School, what are the major causes of violent incidents?

School law enforcement officers identified the lack of compliance by educators, poor parental participation and supervision, bullying, and inadequate administrative leadership as major causes of violence.

Question #4 – If you had the authority, what steps would you take to reduce violence in the Camden City Schools?

School law enforcement officers would increase their membership, examine district policies for conducting sweeps, and get administrators to enforce the rules to reduce school violence. One school law enforcement officer shared, “over the past two years, they have taken out serious power, and have light weights to take their place. We are burning out. We need experienced staff at the hot spots”. Policies governing school lockers would be examined and improved to address security and contraband issues.

Certified School Staff

Morning Session

Question # 1 – Do you feel safe in your school? Has violence increased or decreased? Explain.

Certified staff members felt that schools were unsafe due to the lack of checks and balances from leadership, inconsistency in screening process, and the influence of adjudicated students. Further, they felt students are out of hand and there are no programs in-house to address students with behavioral and mental problems.

Question # 2 – How do psychological, physical health issues and learning issues contribute to incidents of violence in your school? Explain.

Participants stated that the “house is on fire”; violence is everywhere. Staff indicated that there are many factors that contribute to violence including lack of staff, no consequences for bad behavior, lack of continuity given the numerous administrative changes, and severity of students’ emotional problems. Lack of parental involvement and lack of support from administration are also factors that foster violence.

Question #3 – In your view, what are the most frequent incidents of violence in your school and in the Camden City Schools, in general? Rank and explain them.

Certified staff provided an extensive list of incidents which occur in schools. Violent incidents are often caused by gang activity, bullying, trespassers, substance abuse, and gambling. Many of the incidents originate from street problems that filter into schools. Parents were not partners in education. Most parents are more interested in prom activities than graduation. Further, participants indicated that the lack of administrative support regarding discipline issues is a contributor to acts of violence.

Question #4 – How do you view the level of respect between students and students, students and teachers, students and administrators, students and other school staff, students and school law enforcement officers, and parents and all school personnel-both ways- at your school? Explain.

Participants stated that blatant disrespect by students is a major issue. Parents tolerate and allow such behavior without consequences so these students are disrespectful to others. Certified staff shared that respect is connected to discipline and stability. Actions such as social promotion, an attitude of low expectations, and inconsistent enforcement of discipline policies foster disrespect within schools.

Afternoon Session

Question # 1 – Based on your experience in the Camden City Schools, what are the major causes of violent incidents at your school and in the Camden City Schools, in general?

Certified staff indicated that a general lack of knowledge regarding available district and community services, unmet basic needs, combined with poverty and high concentrations of troubled students are some of the causes of violence in schools. Other causes identified include juvenile incarceration, unemployment, ill-educated students and parents, anger driven by abuse, and various other social problems. The district’s uniform policy is not enforced and creates opportunities for outsiders to enter schools.

Question # 2 – Do you feel that violence in the schools is affecting students’ ability to learn, teachers’ ability to teach, and students’ ability to develop positive relationships with their peers and other school staff? Explain.

Certified staff felt that teaching and learning are hampered by violence. Peer mediation and other violence prevention programs to support alternative to violence have been eliminated.

Contracted services for guidance and home instruction teachers reduce funds that could be re-directed to supportive and preventative programs, especially for adjudicated youth. Further, the group indicated that consistency in rewards and consequences, increased parental involvement, and responsive police presence when appropriate, are central to addressing the affects of violence on students and teachers.

Question #3 – Do you feel that the problems in the broader Camden community contribute in any way to incidents of violence in your school and in the Camden City Schools, in general? Explain.

Certified staff stated that community “no snitching” rules, lack of jobs for parents and students, and reductions in welfare programs contribute to school violence. Local businesses and colleges do not give back to community; we need partnerships to create positive opportunities. Some school board members are insensitive to parents and are disconnected from the community. Once participant added that local residents can’t get the jobs.

Question #4 – If you had the authority, what steps would you take to reduce violence in your school and in the Camden City Schools overall?

Participants stated that they would protect the weak and vulnerable, remove the fear, and implement a unified approach to change our community in order to reduce school violence. They recommended examining resources and applying theory to problem solving efforts. One certified staff participant referenced President Barak Obama’s change policy for creating people pressure to organize for needed change. Another staff advised that we separate, evaluate (causes of violence), create (areas for learning) and educate the rest. Accountability and consistency are integral to reducing school violence, especially between administrators and teachers. Lastly, certified staff stated that teachers are often overwhelmed with paperwork and receive multiple schedules in September, to avoid this confusion they recommend presenting and discussing academic goals and expectations in April for the upcoming school year.

Common Themes among Focus Groups

- Enforce school uniform code and security screening practices in order to prevent trespassers from entering school grounds
- Address drug activity and alcohol use among students
- Students and school personnel are impacted by school violence
- Community incidents contribute to school violence
- Parents must be involved, but need to act appropriately with school staff
- Bullying is a major problem
- Lack of respect for school personnel and students
- Schools are unsafe, students and school personnel are fearful
- Accountability and communication must improve
- Special education/special needs students can be difficult; behavior problems create distractions
- Monitoring student movement during school hours is difficult; students leave school go into the community, frequent stores, and misbehave
- Lack of support by administrators
- Enforce school policies appropriately and consistently

- Improve security screening practices
- Adjudicated students cause problems

Increasing participation and collaboration requires that everyone be involved in building and sustaining safe schools and effective violence prevention initiatives. Students, parents, school officials and personnel, local officials, community leaders, civic groups, including youth groups must be tapped to realize these goals. Parents, families, resident, schools, businesses, faith-based organizations, and government agencies working together to address the causes of violence, facilitate relevant programs, and implement long lasting prevention strategies are urgently needed. Such collaboration would benefit students, parents, schools, and the larger community. Further, community partnerships are needed to address cultural and ethnic differences that foster greater appreciation for diversity and celebrate the contributions of many. Enrichment opportunities that enhance conflict resolution and problem solving techniques are sorely needed, especially targeting at-risk students.

Participant Strategies for Reducing Violence

Students: screen potential students, establish school programs for at-risk students, and strictly enforce school policies

Parents: improve communication and accountability among all parties, establish programs for conflict resolution and problem solving, implement in-school suspension, and address issues of drug and alcohol use

School Law Enforcement Officers: increase school law enforcement ranks, get administrators to enforce the rules to reduce violence, and address issues with student lockers

Certified Staff: protect the weak and vulnerable students from bullying and violence, develop change model that ensures accountability and consistency between administration and teachers, and begin planning strategies early for upcoming year

A Call to Action

Board Members and School District Administrators are called upon to emphasize the importance of involving parents and community stakeholders as they work to eliminate acts of violence throughout the district. Convey an urgency to improve educational practices and school environments throughout the education community.

School personnel collectively must continue to work diligently to improve school safety by reporting all acts of violence and bullying. All teachers, principals, counselors, law enforcement officers, support staff, program administrators, and every other member of the school community must help create and sustain safe, supportive learning environments.

State & Local Union Officials must remain steadfast in their efforts to determine professional development needs, and facilitate appropriate training opportunities to ensure members are aware and engaged in efforts to address school safety.

Parents must re-affirm their efforts to better monitor their children's attitudes, experiences, and practices that impact academic and personal development. There is no substitute for engaged and informed parents, working together with educators to ensure students succeed.

Students will need to step up their commitment to academic excellence and activities that promote social growth in school and in the community.

Community Stakeholders must form or strengthen partnerships that enhance and support safe schools, student achievement, and staff development. The greater Camden community must recognize its commitment and contributions to the well being of the community are integral to the overall prosperity of the entire community.

Realities & Recommendations for Next Steps

According to the US Census 2000 data Camden City's population was nearly 80,000 residents, with 35% under the age of 18 and 47% under 25 years of age. Without question Camden is comprised of largely young residents, highlighting the critical nature of quality educational opportunities in safe school environments. Student enrollment in Camden City Schools during the 2006-07 school year was 15,244, 5,332 of which were enrolled in grades 6 through 12, excluding special education students. Therefore, roughly one-third of the district's students attend secondary schools, the remaining two-thirds were elementary and special needs students. Additionally, school enrollment has declined in recent years resulting from student transfer activity, excessive dropout, and other factors. Addressing the issue of school safety may help to stem the tide of student loss. Further, building and sustaining safe schools will be essential to fostering increased graduation rates, enhancing employability among young residents, and shaping new realities for the entire Camden community. Producing college bound, workforce ready, contributing members of this small community will have tangible benefits that are positive and profound. This transition is urgently needed. Currently we have excessive numbers of juveniles arrested and detained, community violence statistics that renders Camden at or near the most dangerous municipalities in the nation, and a growing population of under-educated residents.

While these outcomes appear startling, what is clear is that Camden City Schools combat community and family characteristics that are common among many urban centers across the nation. Some of these shared factors include: high poverty levels, significant crime and violence, large numbers of single-parent households, high unemployment rates, limited job opportunities, ethnically and culturally diverse populations, and less educated residents. Additionally, there are specific school factors common among urban districts, including high student absenteeism and mobility, significant English Language Learners, difficulty hiring and retaining highly qualified staff, older, decaying school facilities, and budgetary challenges resulting from minimal local property tax revenue.

We recognize that there are many factors which impact urban communities and school districts. Further, we realize that efforts for improvement requires all interested parties to work diligently to create the desired changes gradually, yet with great deliberation. For this reason, the following recommendations are presented for consideration to help build and sustain safe school environments for all children enrolled in Camden City Schools.

- Strengthen and strictly enforce anti-bullying policies
 - Children prone to violent behavior can be identified very early in their development. Monitor and enforce student discipline policies beginning with preschoolers. All school staff and students should understand, prevent, and report bullying and violence.
- Plan and facilitate gang awareness workshops for all school personnel
 - The growing presence and incidents of gang activity in our schools requires that all school personnel become knowledgeable of and vigilant in reporting gang related activity. Too often, gang affiliation replaces traditional family connections and places our young people at tremendous risk. Strengthening collaborations with city and county government, law enforcement agencies, and community-based organizations to increase awareness and intervention strategies is strongly encouraged.
- Strengthen central and school administrations connections with other school personnel
 - Guided by shared expectations of success, all levels of the education community must work to facilitate positive academic and social growth of students. Each level has distinct functions, but all are essential ingredients in achieving the desired outcomes. School districts must recognize the importance of positive professional climate in achieving academic success.
- Examine opportunities to create alternative school and educational programs for at-risk students
 - Initiatives that address the academic, emotional, mental, and social needs of at-risk students including previously detained students should be explored. Fact finding efforts should be authorized to determine the feasibility of stand alone programs that meet the needs of challenging student populations. Ensure appropriate and timely assessments, classifications, and service delivery are achieved.
- Implement in-school suspension programs
 - Specifically, programs that provide for the continuity of academic instruction, while addressing anti-social behaviors are encouraged.
- Provide professional development for all school personnel regarding conflict resolution and behavior disorders
 - Professional development is essential to enhancing the knowledge of personnel and crucial to identifying when uncertainty exists. Relevant training opportunities are critical to building broad support and compliance with district policies.

- Strengthen connections and communication with parents and families
 - Violence prevention research on high-risk populations has demonstrated the effectiveness of working with parents who experience socioeconomic and psychological factors that increase their risk for raising antisocial offspring. Interventions for parents may include parenting training and support groups, effective disciplinary techniques, and behavior modification tips.
- Forge stronger community partnerships that support students, parents, and families
 - Enhance and expand connections to community service providers and social service agencies to support and strengthen students and their families.
- Establish life skills, conflict resolution, and problem solving workshops for students
 - Strengthen students' skills for developing self-respect, self-discipline, and self-control that promote safety. We must not make assumptions that this training occurs in every home, or that reinforcement is not necessary.
- Enforce school uniform policy strictly
 - While no one knows for sure if school uniforms reduce school violence, much has been advanced about uniforms increasing security. School uniforms permit school officials to easily identify students, deter intruders, and eliminate gang attire from being worn. Further, as a mandatory policy, school officials are duty bound to promote and enforce the desired dress code.
- Strengthen security procedures
 - Students and staff need safe and supportive learning environments to excel. Safety procedures must be well thought and consistently enforced in order to promote school safety. District and school leaders should plan on-going district-wide meetings of all staff to discuss school safety issues regularly.
- Utilize facilities renovation and construction planning to address school security challenges
 - Building upgrades and new design features should include significant attention to egress and ingress pathways and student movement throughout school buildings.

Conclusion

As concerned members of a caring education community, participants' experiences and views provide important insights for addressing school safety. Their responses enhance our understanding of some the practices that make some schools safe and supportive, and some of the realities that render other schools less safe and supportive. Participants' comments highlight progress underway and persistent challenges regarding school safety and violence. What is universally evident among participants is that more must be done to cultivate expectations of excellence for all students. Further, a deliberate focus on school safety is crucial to achieving excellence and promoting positive development for all students. Continued efforts to assess, inform, and engage a broad array of stakeholders in building and sustaining safe school environments will be of great importance. Specific outreach strategies to engage stakeholders will vary, especially efforts to attract more students and parents to participate more fully. While

this task may be difficult, having mass numbers of informed and engaged students and parents will go miles toward strengthening outcomes for students, as well as, reducing the out-migration of students. School safety is likely the most prominent reason parents seek alternative educational arrangements for their children. Camden City Schools must engage the larger community in cultivating expectations of excellence and improving school safety. The Education Law Center, Camden Education Association, and the New Jersey Education Association remain committed to lifting all voices and participating in efforts to expand excellence and promote safe and supportive schools for the entire school community.

We extend our heartfelt appreciation to all the event attendees, facilitators, recorders, community partners, and other supporters for making this event meaningful! We also wish to applaud the Camden Board of Education for recognizing the importance of community dialogue and stakeholder input. Together we can!

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