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Subject: School violence hits lower grades (U.S.)

School violence hits lower grades

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Greg Toppo USA TODAY

A second-grader in Indiana pulls off his shoe and wields it as a weapon, striking his teacher.

A kindergartner in Philadelphia punches a pregnant teacher in the stomach.

An 8-year-old in Maryland threatens to burn down his suburban elementary school, plotting where he'll pour the gasoline.

Elementary school principals and safety experts say they're seeing more violence and aggression than ever among their youngest students, pointing to what they see as an alarming rise in assaults and threats to classmates and teachers.

"Some of my most violent kids have been in kindergarten, first and second grade," an elementary school principal in rural Wisconsin says. "They simply lose control, and it comes out in extremely violent manners." The principal did not want her name used.

A few experts take issue, saying schools have always seen troubled youngsters in primary grades. They say high-profile school shootings in recent years have simply made educators more attuned to misbehavior at a younger age.

"These are really sensational stories, but for the most part schools are very safe places," says Jamie Ruppman, a Virginia advocate for families of special education students.

School safety consultants insist that they're seeing more young students acting out.

"This is the first year I've gotten a call from a teacher who said, 'I got beaten up by a kindergartner and I'm out on medical leave,'" says Ron Stephens, who heads the National School Safety Center in Westlake Village, Calif., which tracks school violence for the federal government.

Chuck Hibbert, coordinator of security for the Wayne Township, Ind., schools, where the second-grader wielded his shoe last month, says more primary school students are "kicking and biting and scratching and hitting" both their classmates and teachers. In many cases, police are called to the schoolhouse door.

"If someone had asked me this 10 years ago: 'Chuck, how many primary school students have you responded to?' I would have said, 'None.' Now it's an all-too-frequent occurrence," he says.

Though few federal figures exist on very young children and violence, a few state and local statistics suggest that violence by younger children is rising and that schools are cracking down on children as young as kindergarten.

Crime rates drop, not assaults

In California, for example, the latest school crime figures show that from 1995 to 2001, rates of vandalism and other offenses dropped among elementary school students, while "crimes against persons," such as assault, nearly doubled.

With few resources to combat the problem -- it's rare that elementary schools have full-time counselors or social workers -- schools often resort to stricter discipline to get the attention of kids and parents.

* In Philadelphia, the first part of this school year brought the suspensions of 22 kindergartners.

* Minneapolis schools have suspended more than 500 kindergartners over the past two school years for fighting, indecent exposure and "persistent lack of cooperation," among other offenses. Statewide, Minnesota schools have suspended nearly 4,000 kindergartners, first- and second- graders, most for fighting, disorderly conduct and the like.

* In Massachusetts, the percentage of suspended students in prekindergarten through third grade more than doubled between 1995 and 2000, while that of suspended high-schoolers dropped in every grade but 12th. High school students still accounted for 56% of all out-of-school suspensions, while the younger students accounted for about 5%.

* In 2001-2002, schools in Greenville, S.C., suspended 132 first-graders, 75 kindergartners and two preschoolers.

Educators blame everything from rising rates of mild disabilities to violent video games to a poor economy.

Richard Barbacane, who chairs disciplinary hearings for the Lancaster, Pa., school district, says more children are arriving at school from stressed, single-parent homes. He also suspects medical problems such as fetal alcohol syndrome.

"Children now are surviving pregnancies and births that 10 years ago they weren't, and they're coming to school with minimal brain dysfunction and growing needs," he says. "We're just now seeing these children in our schools."

Others, pointing to abusive homes, say many children are actually suffering from a form of post-traumatic stress disorder.

Barbacane says students don't even need to watch *The Sopranos* (news - Y! TV) to see adults behaving badly -- they can turn to an NFL football game and see red-faced, clipboard-wielding coaches berating the referees.

"These are the people who are in charge," he says.

Jim Kelly, chief of the Palm Beach County, Fla., school police, says the past two years have brought police officers into elementary schools for the first time, often to deal with parents who become angry when their children are disciplined.

"A lot of times they're dealing with parents that are very intimidating or violent," Kelly says. "Parents are becoming a major issue in the schools -- just like road rage, you get parents coming in who have a lot of anger."

Though the Department of Education (news - web sites) keeps figures on school violence, most don't specify the age of the child responsible. Overall, federal figures show that violence against teachers has actually dropped a bit -- in the 1999-2000 school year, 9% of elementary and secondary school teachers were threatened by a student; that's down from 12% in 1993-94. In both years, 4% of teachers were attacked by a student.

But the percentage of elementary school teachers who said they were attacked rose from 4.9% to 5.5%, while the percentage of secondary teachers who said the same dropped, from 3.2 % to 2.1%.

Federal figures also show that of the 3,523 students who were expelled in the 1998-99 school year for bringing a gun to school, one in 10 was in elementary school.

Bill Modzeleski, director of the federal Safe and Drug-Free Schools program, says discipline referrals for very young students still pale in comparison to those of middle- and high-school students. He and others caution that younger students aren't getting more violent; schools are simply focusing more on the root causes of violence.

"I think we're getting a better look at what's happening," Modzeleski says. "We're doing a better job of reporting, of paying closer attention to it."

Margaret Boling Mullin, assistant principal at Stout Field Elementary School in Wayne Township, says schools are making an attempt to intervene earlier with counseling, crisis intervention and peer mediation programs.

"As an educator, I have to take a child where he or she is and help them move to more healthy habits," she says. "But I don't want to get sucked into 'The sky is falling, it's all getting worse no matter what we do.' "

As in Pennsylvania, schools in several states are increasingly suspending even young students, often referring them to court-ordered alternative programs and required family counseling.

In Fairfax County, Va., several elementary schools are home to schools-within-schools, where area students with discipline problems attend class.

'Stupid, stupid, stupid policy'

Temple University psychology professor Irwin Hyman says the rise in Philadelphia suspensions is a result of a zero-tolerance policy that forces principals to report all violent incidents, even minor ones.

"It's a stupid, stupid, stupid policy," he says. "When a 5-year-old comes in violent, where does it come from? It comes from his home. And you're going to send him home?"

Philadelphia officials defend this year's 22 suspensions as minuscule compared with the city's total population of more than 16,000 kindergartners. District spokeswoman Cecilia Cummings says schools use suspension as a last resort.

"We're engaging parents when other avenues have failed to do so," she says.

Kathleen Boundy, co-director of the Center for Law and Education in Boston, which represents low-income children, says the idea of suspending a kindergartner, even to get the parents' attention, puzzles her.

"It just seems to me a warped logic when we deny children education and then wonder why they don't succeed," she says.

Ruppmann, the special education advocate, says schools can't wait until children are in kindergarten to work with families if they hope to stem the tide of bad behavior.

"It's too late to do what we always do, which is to hand-wring and suspend," she says.

She and others say teachers simply have to be trained to calm anxious or traumatized children.

Dan Losen of the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University calls the tougher discipline "part of the tsunami of intolerance" for bad behavior that also harshly punishes lesser offenses such as dress code violations, tardiness and other minor misbehaviors.

"Any school psychologist who knows anything will tell you that it's totally inappropriate to be suspending a kindergartner who isn't really posing a serious threat," he says.

"Developmentally they're not learning anything by the suspension. Kids that age need an immediate response that's a logical consequence for their behavior."

Ohio school safety consultant Ken Trump worries that new federal rules allowing students to transfer out of "persistently dangerous" schools will tempt principals to underreport crime among all age groups.

"School administrators are going to be very, very cautious in terms of how they're documenting both disciplinary incidents and crime to avoid being slapped with the label of 'persistently dangerous,' " he says.

But Modzeleski says schools are beginning to realize that they need to deal with school violence from an early age.

"It's a sign that these problems don't just begin in junior high school," he says. "These problems are there in elementary school."

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