

Mikva Challenge Youth Safety Council 2008 Summer Recommendations

The Mikva Challenge Youth Safety Council (YSC) IS comprised of 11 high school students from across Chicago, and we seek ways to alleviate violence by promoting youth safety. We endeavor to distinguish violence related problems within schools and the communities, look at the root causes and conduct research and take or recommend action accordingly. Our goal is to help decrease violence and give youth an opportunity to be the solution and not just the problem.

As the number of tragic deaths among youth increases dramatically, we demand a better understanding of youth safety, through which we are not only the subjects but the experts. Research is important because by researching we attempt to understand why violence is occurring rapidly and dramatically.

Through our voice and recommendations we can help our city and peers decrease the violence. By learning and listening to youth, our government can attain a better understanding of what is going on and how youth see what is happening.

Through our work this summer and our personal experiences we have developed and now present recommendations to the Commissioner of the Chicago department of Chicago and Youth Services in hopes that through this report we can play an integral role in promoting social justice and peace within communities.

Addressing Underlying Causes of Violence

Rough Draft

Mikva Challenge Youth Safety Council 2008 Summer Recommendations

Problem:

Students are often afraid to express their feelings to others because of a lack of familiarity and out of a fear that they will be judged and or labeled. This fear leads to students not sharing their emotions thus causing disruptions in the classroom, and ultimately violence or depression.

Goal:

To create a space where students feel safe and comfortable sharing how they feel.

Recommendation:

Create a space where students can come together and share their feelings openly and without fear of this being used against them later.

Implementation suggestion:

- Having a targeted session with students who have been violent instead of an in-school suspension
- Inviting an outside organization who can create a peaceful and neutral environment where the students can feel safe about sharing
- Invite people from different neighborhoods, schools, cultures, customs and races to openly have a dialogue about their experiences and reflect upon them
- Schools should be committed to having this space through the year and not just a few sessions so students can build relationships and open up

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Problem:

Most students, and adults for that matter, lack the proper training to deal with or discuss emotions, their place in this world and how they feel about themselves. Not being able to deal with these very basic, yet profound questions/issues clouds the ability of people to make appropriate and rational decisions regarding their own personal situations. Youth in particular then struggle to make sense of the world around them and look to destructive outlets through which they can see the world and feel protected.

Goal:

To provide incoming freshmen with the skills, understanding and ability with which to deal issues such as sexual harassment, conflict resolution, media literacy, anger management and the truth about gangs.

Recommendation:

Through the Freshmen Connection program, schools should offer incoming freshmen workshops on sexual harassment, conflict resolution, media literacy, anger management and the truth about gangs.

Implementation suggestions:

- CPS could develop a schedule in which starting from the 5th grade into their freshmen year, they must complete a series of workshops to be able to begin high school
- High Schools could bring in outside community-based organizations to have workshops during specific days, “think days”
- High schools could have exchanges with other schools during “think days”

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Problem:

The competition for youth jobs, volunteer opportunities and internships is extremely high. One contributing factor is the lack of quality advertisements to youth in all communities and schools. These limited opportunities leave youth idle and left to their own devices. Youth in this situation often turn other alternatives, which include violence and gang affiliation. Furthermore many communities that are directly affected or stigmatized by Violence do not offer the same youth jobs, volunteer and internships opportunities as other communities.

Goal:

To create more youth jobs volunteer and internship opportunities, and expand the opportunities that already exists. In addition there should be a concerted effort to flood communities affected by violence with these opportunities, and increase the volume of Advertisements within schools and communities.

Recommendation:

Increase the internship opportunities in general but especially within communities affected by violence.

Implementation suggestions:

- Provide more youth job, volunteer and internship positions for youth.
- Flood communities affected by violence with youth job, volunteer and internship opportunities.
- Expand the selection process of these opportunities so any student in need can have an opportunity to work and gain meaningful work experience.
- Create more youth job, volunteer and internship opportunities that extend beyond the summer and into the school year.
- Make sure these opportunities give students a meaningful work experience that they will be able to use later in life.

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Problem:

Students feel a lack of inspiration and inadequate support within school. In an environment where they are searching for moral support and shared experience, they find instead overworked staff and limited resources of encouragement. This can lead to a sense of isolation and desperation.

Goal:

To bring in people who have a shared experience with the youth, who can challenge them and push them to think about the future.

Recommendation:

Have motivating activities and motivational speakers at schools

Implementation Suggestions:

- Distribute surveys and conduct forums to determine students' particular interests.
- Initiate a student assembly resembling a college fair wherein students can engage in various exciting programs that concern them.
- Create programs/activities consistent with students' interests.
- Encourage students to direct their own activities.
- Activities must be highly advertised by means of media.
- Bring in motivational speakers every so often and let them sit down with students—either individually or collectively.
- Have Motivational Days at least twice a month
- Have discussions about the hardships and positives of life.
- Hire individual mentors.

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Problem:

Students spend the majority of the day at school, with limited opportunity to connect with their peers. Students face a whole myriad of issues on a day to day basis and often adults, school staff and administrators forget that student still need a social outlet. They often do not have enough positive social interaction with their peers.

Goals:

To implement a consistent and intentional process to encourage students to participate in social gatherings both in and outside of school. Through these social gatherings students should find it easier to express their feelings, ideas and develop positive relationships with both their peers and adults.

Recommendation:

Schools should encourage students to participate in social gatherings both in and outside of school.

Implementation Suggestions:

- Schools could offer to have a “Saturday chill day” where students can hang out in certain areas of the building (i.e. the gym or auditorium)
- Schools could offer to screen movies on Friday evenings or during a day every month
- Schools could open their gyms for students to play sports with other teens
- Schools could have more outings for their students (i.e. trips to zoos, museums and various parks in and around the Chicagoland area.)
- Schools could have social gatherings at the school or off site, providing a space for teens to talk about their issues and situations.

Community Centered Strategies to Address Violence

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Problem:

Many community residents and youth feel powerless to do anything to stop or stem the violence they face on a daily basis. Often times they might feel as though they are the only ones concerned about the issue and may be reluctant to do anything about on their own.

Goal:

To create an active network of people in communities affected by violence who are willing and able to mobilize their peers to work to make their communities safer

Recommendation:

Neighborhood committees should be developed comprised of preexisting groups to address violence in and around schools.

Implementation suggestions:

- Bring pre-existing groups such as LSCs, block clubs, neighborhood watch groups, etc together to look at and address issues of violence
- Neighborhood committees should receive a pot of money from the city of Chicago through which they could host free community events
- Have monthly protests, rallies or activities to keep the attention on the issue of violence and to keep building up support in the community for their efforts

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Problem:

Often parents are not aware of the realities their children face on a daily basis. Many students act out in school and in the community for the attention they are deprived of at home. In many circumstances a simple acknowledgment or recognition from their parents of the difficulties that child faces could serve as a huge boost for the child.

Goal:

To increase parental involvement and get parents to become aware of their children's daily realities.

Recommendation:

To increase parental awareness and involvement regarding their children at school.

Implementation Suggestion:

- Assign a staff member to make phone calls inviting parents to volunteer at school.
- Provide stipends for parents who volunteer a certain amount of hours in the school.
- Create opportunities where parents and their children can interact in non-traditional ways: facilitating workshops, attending conferences, and taking field trips.
- CPS should reach out to large employers of CPS parents so they can get credit for volunteering at school and not be docked pay for it.

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Problem:

Due to the violence that is prevalent in many communities, people are afraid to leave their homes and become active members of their communities. This leads to sense that no one cares and could serve to discourage people from coming forward to help stop the violence either with ideas or actions

Goal:

To create an atmosphere through free community events where community residents and youth are not afraid and can begin the process towards decreasing violence.

Recommendation:

Hold free community events in communities affected by violence to help people come out and not be afraid.

Implementation Suggestions:

- Start by having a neighborhood march.
- March through the communities protesting against violence.
- Host workshops in communities during events such as carnivals, festivals and block parties that look at ways to resolve conflicts
- Have age specific activities that target all age ranges and deal with issues relating to violence
- Host an intervention that has free food, giveaways and workshops dealing with issues relating to violence

Interrupting Violence at Schools

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Problem:

Teachers, administrators and most school staff cannot detect when violence is about to occur. They also cannot assess when verbal violence is escalating into physical violence. Often school staff can only identify a violent situation once it has become physically violent. Once they have identified a violent situation, school staff members have a tendency to inadvertently take the violence to a higher level, instead of defusing a situation.

Goal:

To train teachers, security guards and school administrators how to identify, mediate and resolve conflicts before they become physically violent.

Recommendation:

Have school staff (teachers, security guards, administration) attend conflict resolution training.

Implementation Suggestions:

- Survey students and staff to identify how well each group thinks violent incidences are mediated at schools.
- Ask CPS officials to include this training as a mandatory professional development workshop in new contracts with the teacher union.
- Present this training as a voluntary workshop for both teachers and security guards.
- Include a conflict resolution workshop in the regional security guard training.
- Have forums for the security guards at schools or regionally.

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Problem:

Most schools often deal with violence after it has occurred because they do not have the staff or the training to deal with, identify or defuse it before it takes place. This leads to students developing a negative impression of staff because they do not have the proper skills to deal with violence issues and violent students.

Goal:

Using the ceasefire model, schools should identify a person whom can actively work towards defusing violence before it happens and provide an example as to how it is done.

Recommendation: Every CPS high school should hire a violence interrupter.

Implementation:

- Hire a part time violence interrupter who can also serve as a counselor
- Have an outside Community based organization house staff at the school who serve as the violence interrupter
- Have Ceasefire provide training for all counselors at the school, whom in turn could all serve as violence interrupters
- The violence interrupter can support all school staff who receive conflict mediation trainings

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Problem:

Students acting out in a violent or disruptive manner is a manifestation of deeper seeded issues many students face and suspending students without addressing the core of the problem which can be an inability to deal with emotions and self esteem issues ensures that the behavior will be repeated.

Goal:

The goal is to have conflict resolutions that'll provide a positive way to connect with the students.

Recommendation:

Schools should consider having conflict resolution trainings instead of in-school suspension.

Implementation Suggestions:

- Change the core principles behind in-school suspension away from a punitive measure and towards a restorative process where students can develop skills to help them cope with future situations in a more productive manner
- Other disciplinary measures should also be geared towards providing skills for students to better be able to deal with similar situations

Improving Youth-Police Relations

Rough Draft

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Problem:

There exists a disconnect, between what the Chicago Police Department's mission statement says and what the public perception of what Chicago Police Officers do is. There exists a notion that Police officers are crooked, corrupt and out to protect themselves and their fellow police officers. This perception leads to a deep mistrust and antagonist relationship between youth and police officers.

Goal:

To bridge the gap between the police department's mission statement and their perceived actions

Recommendation:

Police should help promote social justice & peace

Implementation suggestions:

- The Police academy should offer classes on social justice and peace
- There could be community classes on social justice and peace that both police officers, community residents and youth can attend
- Police officers could host social justice and peace themed events in different communities

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Problem:

Police officers stationed at schools are not involved enough with students to create a positive relationship, and when they are involved it tends to be when the student(s) are in trouble. This leads to a deepening divide and mistrust between youth and the police officers and leads to a further breakdown in communication between the two groups.

Goal:

To create a positive relationship between students and police within schools

Recommendation:

Get police more involved in school extracurricular activities

Implementation suggestions:

- Have a meet and greet with police officers for students
- Have a career day where students visit police stations or attend youth police academies
- Have a sports day hosted by police officers
- Students can create workshops dealing with issues at each specific high school and have police officers attend
- Create a service-learning partnership between the Chicago Police Department and the Chicago Public Schools

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Problem:

In many communities the only time they have contact with police officers is during what would be considered a negative experience. As such many community residents have a negative opinion of the CPD.

Goal:

Chicago Police Officers will become more involved in community events and activities.

Recommendation:

Have Chicago Police officers more involved in community events and activities, especially in communities affected by violence.

Implementation Suggestions:

- Create a partnership between CPS and CPD to work/volunteer together on community projects
- Police representatives should attend events such as block parties, Local School Council meetings , ward nights and open houses/report card pick up at schools
- Have the police department partner with community based organizations and schools for fieldtrips and outings.
- Increase participation of schools in the CAPS youth-police forums.
- Have CAPS meeting during or right after school and invite the community to attend.
- Much like ward nights where constituents can speak to their alderman, have community nights in different locations where residents can speak to a representative from the police department.

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As we developed our recommendations for this report, we look forward to compelling local decision-makers, our peers and residents of the city of Chicago to change the way that we view violence against young people and the way we protect them. The endeavor calls for a comprehensive approach to youth safety—that is to say, one that looks at social-emotional needs, economic realities, the role of the family and peers as well as social structures and their impact on Youth.

We laid emphasis this summer on gang violence; youth police relations, women’s safety issues, and media portrayal of youth and violence. We make an effort to minimize gang recruitment of innocent young people; to rebuild a better relationship between youth and police, as well as between community and police; to put women’s safety issues to the forefront; to transform the way the media portrays our youth in relation to violence. Some of the influences come from the media and make a huge impact on our youth. At times, it may urge them to live the life that they’ve witnessed in the media.

Not only should our readers take this report into consideration, but they also should utilize it as a guide for themselves to gain a new perspective regarding youth safety issues. We hope you can take one or more recommendations and put it into practice. Thank you!!

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Acknowledgements

Susan D. Wright
For Kids' Sake

Claude Robinson
UCAN

Guillermo Gutierrez
BUILD Inc.

Daphnee Rene
Young Women's Action Team

David

Miguel

Chicago Police Department's 3rd District CAPS

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