

# No New Wars Needed!

To appear in Reclaiming Children and Youth, Spring 2001.

*The authors of this article call for an end to a “prevention war” mentality that breeds programs for youth that are high profile, short-term, and in competition with programs already in place. Instead, this article advocates for comprehensive, sustained efforts that promote the personal and social development of young people and addresses problems at their psychosocial roots.*



**By Maurice J. Elias, Linda Lantieri, Janet Patti, Timothy P. Shriver, Herbert J. Walberg, Roger P. Weissberg, and Joseph E. Zins**

Coming through the door at Anywhere School, a visitor is struck by the legacy of more than two decades of school-based “prevention wars.” In the main office, a bulletin board announces the start of a new AIDS program, led by a teacher who taught classes in health and nutrition when those issues were highly visible. This year’s “life issues” classes are required because they cover a new state-mandated unit on the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases. Up in the science wing, biology teachers are introducing the substance-abuse program, which once was a full-semester class but is now a one-month unit on what drugs and tobacco do to the body. There’s only one dropout-prevention worker, where a couple of years ago there were four. He is planning meetings with the 100 or so students who have been absent more than 20 days and is frustrated because they don’t show up. Meanwhile, social-studies teachers have begun teaching about violence in America, and the superintendent has scheduled a special meeting of the board of education to develop a plan to begin a character education program.

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Need we wonder why new “prevention” initiatives are met with ambivalence in most schools, or why it may be time for policymakers to try a new approach to such programming? School personnel see the importance of programs to enhance students’ social, emotional, and physical well being, but they also regard prevention campaigns with skepticism and frustration, since most have been introduced as a succession of disjointed fads. Fragmentation breeds breakdown, and the school emerges as a hodgepodge of social initiatives with little direction or effectiveness.

This chaos has its roots in a misguided approach to problem behaviors. Over the years, policymakers and educators have joined forces to battle a series of social and behavioral problems, waging separate “wars” on drug abuse, unwanted teen pregnancy, AIDS, suicide, violence, and dropouts. Although these “wars” have been well-intentioned, the individual battles have had limited success due to the lack of a coordinated strategy to address students’ needs. Unfortunately, they have also left behind continuing high levels of problems.

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The war mentality breeds programs that are high-profile, short-term, and often in competition with programs already in place. Proponents of these new wars must compete for public attention to persuade elected officials to pledge funds. Alarmist statistics announce plague-like conditions as though a new virus had beset the population. In response, political leaders vie for the chance to champion the new cause. Divisions eventually appear, and the war becomes a compromise between ideologies that have little to do with children. Finally, a campaign is launched that diverts scarce resources away from whatever effort is under way, causing a dislocation of school personnel and an abrupt demand for new programming.

This formula is unlikely to be effective in schools. Rather than solving problems, it usually leads to new ones—problems that no institution can easily overcome. Consider the following negative outcomes that result from the fragmentation at Anywhere High: Ten or 20 staff members may work on similar issues without any coordination or expertise or resources; few of the prevention programs last more than a few years, not long enough for improvements to be made; many initiatives are reactive rather than preventive, and by the time the work is begun, the problem is well out of hand; and, the different programs are frequently aimed at the same children, splitting them into categories of problem behaviors and never addressing the causes underlying the social problems in the first place.

It is time for a different strategy, one that capitalizes on what schools are already in the business of doing: promoting the personal and social development of children. Let's not counter each behavior problem that arises with a new categorical initiative that has no place in the structure of the school. Instead, schools should proactively build comprehensive programs that help children develop socially and emotionally. As a result, children will become competent in ways that can help them learn better and avoid problem behaviors.

Comprehensive social-and emotional-development programs are based on the understandings that many

different kinds of problem behaviors are caused by the same risk factors, and that the best learning emerges from supportive and challenging relationships. Preventing problems such as violence, drug abuse, or dropping out is most effective when multiyear integrated efforts develop children's social and emotional abilities through engaging classroom instruction; prosocial learning activities outside the classroom; and broad parent and community participation in program planning, implementation, and evaluation. Comprehensive programs begin at an early age and continue in a developmentally appropriate sequence through high school. Such an approach realistically addresses problems at their psycho-

social roots. Destructive behaviors develop in part from a complex web of familial, economic, and cultural circumstances. These factors are part of the fabric of life and difficult to attack. Yet strategies that help children develop the resilience to cope adaptively with modern-day stresses can be effective, and it is there that schools need to focus their efforts. Many educators claim to provide instruction that enhances social and emotional learning. But most base their efforts only on intuition and struggle independently, with little support. Moreover, programs that address these issues too often are relegated to second-class status. We need more systematic, well-designed programs implemented by well-trained staff members in supportive educational contexts.

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Fortunately, there are scientifically based guidelines available that can help schools produce knowledgeable, responsible, caring students and communities. After reviewing the scientific literature, making the site visits and interviewing practitioners throughout the country, and examining their own experiences over many years in the field, members of the Collaborative to Advance Social and Emotional Learning—an international network of educators, scientists, and concerned citizens—compiled the book Promotional Social and Emotional Learning: Guidelines for Educators (ASCD, 1997) and presented a list of 39 guidelines for providing effective social and emotional education. Several that are relevant to fostering a safer, more caring school climate follow:

√ Build and reinforce life skills and social competencies; health promotion and problem-prevention skills; coping skills; and social support for transitions, crises, and for making positive social contributions.

√ Link efforts to build social and emotional skills to developmental milestones, as well as to the need to help students cope with ongoing life events and local circumstances.

√ Emphasize the promotion of prosocial attitudes and values about self, others, and work.

√ Integrate social and emotional learning with traditional academics to enhance learning in both areas.

√ Build a caring, supportive, and challenging classroom and school climate to assure effective social and emotional teaching and learning.

√ Integrate and coordinate social and emotional learning programs and activities with the regular curriculum and life of the classroom and school.

√ Foster enduring and pervasive effects in this type of social and emotional learning through collaboration between home and school.

The focus of reform and renewal among educators, politicians, and the public continues to miss the mark. To change a school's culture so all children can learn, we must address the relationships that exist in that school. Adults and young people who develop skills to communicate with one another, problem-solve together, believe in the richness of diversity, and embrace conflict as an opportunity to grow, can and do contribute to the kind of school culture we search for in schools today. But we can't change a school's culture unless we are willing and able to reflect on our own capacities to accept and respond to change ourselves. The problem is not "out there". It begins with each and every one of us.

Thousands of schools around the country are

invested in promoting the kind of learning that will foster children's social and emotional development. In such schools, prosocial values are visible everywhere in the interactions among students and staff. Students constantly reflect on and discuss ways to live together peacefully, to deal with angry feelings appropriately, and to be assertive without being mean. In many schools, student mediators, peer counselors, and student leaders earn the respect of their peers by helping to keep the peace.

The Collaborative to Advance Social and Emotional Learning, also known as CASEL, has identified research-based programs that address these issues. Among them are such widely acclaimed programs as the School Development Program, the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program, Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies, the Child Development Project, Social Decision Making and Problem Solving, Second Step, the Responsive Classroom, and others.

What are some of the basic principles of effectiveness that have emerged from such efforts? In creating comprehensive school-based prevention programs, the following is usually present:

- They simultaneously—and seamlessly—address students' mental-emotional, social, and physical health, rather than focusing on one categorical outcome. Ultimately, comprehensive and integrated programs that target multiple social and health problem behaviors have greater potential than short-term interventions that target the prevention of a single problem behavior.
- They are based on developmentally appropriate, sequential preschool-to-high-school classroom instruction. Programming starts before students are pressured to experiment with risky behaviors and should continue through adolescence.
- Competence-enhancement programs must address students' cognitive, affective, and

behavioral skills; their attitudes and values about themselves and others; their perceptions of social norms; and their understanding of information about targeted social and health domains. Currently, there are too many ineffective prevention programs that stress knowledge about specific problems and fail to concentrate on the skills and values necessary to help children engage in health-protective behaviors.

- Effective instruction requires teaching methods that ensure active student engagement, emphasize positive behavior, and change the ways in which children and adults communicate about problem situations. Innovative teaching techniques such as modeling, role-playing, performance feedback, and positive reinforcement are critical.
- Multilevel interventions in which peers, parents, the school, and community members create a learning climate and reinforce classroom instruction are needed to address the widespread social problems of children. Children grow and develop at home and in the school and community. Combining environmental support and reinforcement from peers, family members, school personnel, health professionals, religious leaders, and the media increases the likelihood that students will adopt healthier lifestyles. In every environment, greater cultural sensitivity to socio-demographically-diverse students must be developed.

- System-level policies and practices to support program implementation and institutionalization must be developed. It is critical, for example, for teachers to be trained before the program is implemented and for them to be supported and coached for extended periods of practice. Coaching and other teacher supports communicate to teachers that their efforts and their training needs are being noticed and validated.

As these principles suggest, the future of prevention efforts in schools is both complicated and promising. Anywhere School need not be the model for how schools respond to student needs. Retreat from responsibility is not the only alternative. A new war is not the missing ingredient. We do not need another short-term, categorical prevention program that undermines all the work launched in the past. Nor do we need a new law promising high-profile expenditures designed for political visibility rather than actual support of children.

What we do need is a new approach that understands that the best we can do for children is support their full growth and development. When prevention is conceived in the best interests of the child, it will be educational in the fullest sense of the word. □

*This article was adapted with permission from **Violence is Preventable** by Elias, Lantieri, Patti, Walberg, and Zinns, **Education Week**, May 19, 1999 and **No New Wars** by Shriver and Weissberg, **Education Week**, May 15, 1996.*

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