

ERIC DIGEST

SEPTEMBER 2000

NUMBER 139 EDO-EA-00-05

Profiling Students for Violence

By Linda Lumsden

In the aftermath of the flurry of shootings and other incidents of violence that have erupted in our nation's schools during the past few years, teachers and administrators are desperately seeking reliable ways of foretelling which students may be at serious risk of crossing over the invisible line into violence. Although there is no crystal ball that can predict with certainty an individual student's future potential for violence, school officials are intensifying their efforts to identify potentially dangerous students.

Student profiling is one controversial approach to violence prevention that many administrators are contemplating in their quest to keep schools safe. While some perceive profiling as a promising tool, others view it as an ill-conceived response to the issue of school violence that will do more harm than good. This Digest defines profiling, discusses issues raised by profiling students for violence, and describes additional strategies for reducing the risk of violence in schools.

What Is Student Profiling?

Student profiling is a term used to refer to a process in which checklists of behaviors and personal characteristics associated with youth who have perpetrated violence are used to try to gauge an individual student's potential for acting out in a violent manner in the future. If a large number of items on the list appear to be true for a particular student, the assumption is that the student is at higher risk for committing violence.

As Fey and others (2000) state, "In inductive profiling, the profiler looks for patterns in the available data and infers possible outcomes—in the case of schools, possible acts of violence committed by students who fit the pattern. The strategy is used to predict behavior and apprehend potential offenders *before* they commit a crime" [emphasis in original].

Should School Personnel Attempt To Predict Student Behavior?

One central issue surrounding the prospect of profiling students for violence is whether school personnel should attempt to make predictions about an individual student's propensity for future violence, a task that has been elusive even for trained mental-health professionals.

U.S. Education Secretary Richard W. Riley opposes use of behavioral profiling by schools to identify potentially violent students. Riley contends a better way to enhance school safety is for teachers and administrators to create a caring environment that promotes a sense of connection among students and between students and staff (Kenneth Cooper 2000). Riley also points out that research conducted at the University of Oregon's Institute on Violence and Destructive Behavior indicates that when schools promote compassion, discipline, and peaceful conflict resolution they can prevent 80 percent of violent behavior (Cooper).

Joe Morrison, school director at North Allegheny, one of Pittsburgh's largest suburban school districts, states, "This is a business we shouldn't even consider getting into" (McKay 1999). He believes students could be unfairly labeled and information placed in their school files could haunt them for the remainder of their educational careers (McKay).

The School Shooter: A Threat Assessment Perspective (O'Toole 2000), a report recently released by the FBI, provides a model for assessing the seriousness of threats and offering intervention. The report states that "at this time, there is no research that has identified traits and characteristics that can reliably distinguish school shooters from other students" and asserts that developing a profile "may sound like a reasonable preventive measure, but in practice trying to draw up a catalogue or 'checklist' of warning signs to detect a potential school shooter can be short-sighted, even dangerous."

However, Mary Leiker, superintendent of the Kentwood, Michigan, Public Schools, which has implemented a program to assess students for violence, has a different perspective. She notes, "Profiling isn't some-

thing most of us think we're going to do. But.... the fact is, I have to live with myself. If I, as a superintendent and educator, left one stone unturned in trying to keep children safe, if I lost one child because of it, I don't know how I would cope" (LaFee 2000).

Many of those in support of profiling students for violence are convinced keeping schools safe is so critical that measures perceived as extreme are warranted. Some administrators are concerned that if violence visits their school they could confront legal action—as well as tremendous personal guilt—if they haven't done everything in their power to try to create a safe school environment. However, electing to engage in profiling also raises an array of legal and ethical issues for schools.

Is Profiling Reliable?

A critical issue to be examined is whether profiling students for violence is a reliable process. That is, can profiling accurately predict a student's potential for perpetrating violence?

According to Lois Flaherty, a child and adolescent psychologist and spokesperson for the American Psychological Association, the verdict is still out. She states, "I don't think we have any data to show whether it is effective or not. And the lack of research is just one of many issues here" (LaFee).

FBI agent Terry Royster argues that teachers, who observe and interact with students on a daily basis over time, are more reliable sources of information about which students are most troubled and in need of help. He says, "What I stress is to really forget the school shooter behavioral assessments and go into the classroom. Every teacher can tell you who's likely to cause trouble" (LaFee).

Another complicating factor is that there is not a single list of behavioral "warning signs" about which consensus exists among professionals. Rather, there are several lists, each developed by different educational and mental-health related organizations. When items on one list of "warning signs" are compared with items on another, there is often only low to moderate overlap (Fey and others).



In other words, even the issue of what variables may be indicators of future violence remains at least partially unresolved. Therefore, an initial challenge facing schools that opt to engage in student profiling is deciding which list of guidelines to use as the standard against which to assess youth.

Also, some warning-sign lists, like the one included in the Department of Education publication *Early Warning, Timely Response* (1998), were never intended to be used for profiling purposes. However, despite a strong caution to this effect contained within the publication itself, in some cases this message has gone unheeded, which disturbs Kevin Dwyer, one of the authors ("Profiling Students May Cause More Harm" 1999).

What Questions and Concerns Are Raised by Student Profiling?

A decision about profiling should not be made lightly. Its implications for both students and schools are far-reaching and should be given due consideration.

One caveat is that although certain behavioral patterns or characteristics tend to be more prevalent among youth who commit violent acts, many youth may display these behaviors or characteristics—or fit the "profile"—yet never become violent. As LaFee states, "Descriptions of moody, angry, confrontational and low self-esteem can be used to describe almost any teenager at some point."

Fey and others also point out that "school authorities could face legal action, as well as negative media attention, once a student is wrongfully identified as being at risk for committing violence."

Another concern is expressed by Hill Walker, codirector of the Institute on Violence and Destructive Behavior at the University of Oregon, who notes that efforts to gauge students' propensity for future violence inevitably result in both false positives and false negatives ("Profiling Students May Cause More Harm"). Walker believes "the potential of abuse is as great as the potential of violence."

Other issues that remain unresolved are noted by Flattery: "There's the question of who is doing the identifying of students and the evaluation. What happens with the results? Will they be used to single kids out for further stigmatization and isolation? What are the civil liberties concerns?" (LaFee).

Fey and others underscore the fact that "stereotyping, discrimination, and

the wrongful identification of potential perpetrators are ethically unjustified, even if the intention is to protect children from harm." As they also point out, implementing profiling alters a school's culture and climate, and "touches at the very core of what schools should and will look like" (Fey and others).

Another significant issue, raised by Pam Riley, executive director of the Center for the Prevention of School Violence, is that even if school personnel are able to accurately identify troubled students through profiling, most don't know what to do next (LaFee). Should school personnel just attempt to keep a close eye on the student? Can or should they require students/families to obtain mental health services? Move the student to an alternative educational placement? Expel the student?

What Other Options Can Schools Employ To Prevent Violence?

Youth violence is an extremely complex issue, and it will take a concerted effort by many sectors of society to make headway in addressing the problem. Fortunately, some promising paths to pursue are at hand.

Elias and colleagues contend that schools can play a major role in preventing violence by choosing to invest in social and emotional learning as well as academic learning. They believe the mission of schools must include teaching students "to engage in thoughtful decisionmaking, understand signs of one's own and others' feelings, listen accurately, remember what we hear and learn, communicate effectively, [and] respect differences." Assisting students to develop competence in such social and emotional skills will not only reduce interpersonal violence but will also foster a caring and cooperative environment that supports academic learning.

Engaging in what is sometimes referred to as *incident profiling* (as opposed to *student profiling*) can also aid schools in their quest to reduce violence and other behavioral incidents (LaFee). Incident profiling entails reviewing office-referral data to learn such things as the primary reasons students are sent to the office or suspended, locations in the school building where problems tend to occur (such as lunch room, hallways), whether incidents are clustered around certain segments of the school day, and so forth. Office-referral data are maintained by most schools but rarely reviewed and analyzed. The data can often reveal

trends and shed light on adjustments that are needed in the school setting (for example, placing more teachers in the hallways to better monitor the between-class transition time if most incidents in a particular school are happening during these periods).

Functional assessments are another tool schools can use to address problem behavior at an individual level rather than a schoolwide level. In a functional assessment, data concerning factors that may be influencing a particular student's problematic behavior are collected through direct observation. The purpose of the assessment is to identify variables that trigger the behavior and factors that help to maintain it, form hypotheses about the purpose the behavior is serving for the individual, and ultimately to formulate a behavior-support plan to teach and promote desired behaviors to replace the problem behavior (Sprague and others 1998).

Michael Greene, executive director of The Violence Institute, says, "First and foremost school officials, whether administrators or teachers or whoever, have to listen to students in a non-judgmental manner. Often, that's all a child needs—someone to talk to. And that requires only minimal training" (LaFee).

In a time when communities across the country are clamoring for evidence that school leaders are doing everything in their power to prevent further episodes of school violence, administrators must carefully consider the potential risks as well as the possible benefits associated with anything being touted as a tool to make schools safer.

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