2006

A Qualitative Assessment of Superintendents' Decision-Making Practices in Selecting School Violence Prevention Programs

Darren Anthony Petersen
Seton Hall University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarship.shu.edu/dissertations

Part of the Educational Administration and Supervision Commons, and the Secondary Education and Teaching Commons

Recommended Citation
https://scholarship.shu.edu/dissertations/102
A QUALITATIVE ASSESSMENT OF SUPERINTENDENTS’ DECISION-MAKING PRACTICES IN SELECTING SCHOOL VIOLENCE PREVENTION PROGRAMS

BY

DARREN ANTHONY PETERSEN

Dissertation Committee

Anthony J. Colella, Ph. D., Mentor
Michael Onuto, Ed. D.
Diana DiGiacomo, Ph. D.
Joseph Montesano, Ed. D.

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education
Seton Hall University
2006
ABSTRACT

School violence challenges educators to prepare for the worst-case scenario, whether it is a school shooter, gang violence, terrorism, bullying and/or other factors that jeopardize a school’s ability to create a safe and secure school environment that will foster strong relationships, and maximize student learning and achievement. The purpose of this study is two-fold. The first purpose of this study is to investigate the decision-making practices of three superintendents in Northern New Jersey in selecting school violence prevention programs to determine if the programs are data driven and research based. The second purpose of this study is to investigate how teachers perceived their input on the decision-making practices of their superintendent in the selection of school violence prevention programs. It is the intent of this study to determine if superintendents made comprehensive, collaborative, and effective decisions when being involved in the selection, implementation and evaluation of a school violence prevention program.

Data gathered in this study was of a qualitative nature. Interview questions and focus group questions were developed after thorough research and validated by a jury of experts. The responses to interviews and focus group discussions were analyzed to determine if there were common trends, patterns, and concerns between superintendents and teachers as it factors into decision making for curriculum for school violence prevention.

The analysis of the interviews with superintendents and focus group discussions suggests that there needs to be more dialogue between administrators, teachers and school personnel. This would allow a district to compile additional data that may be used to select, implement and evaluate the most effective programs for the composition of that
district. The results of the data review illustrated that teachers are looking for superintendents who are open and receptive to teachers’ concerns, are consistent with district policies, and are going to follow-up with their decisions.

This study determined that a superintendent can make effective decisions for school violence prevention programs if he or she understands the needs of his or her district, compiles research, engages in extensive communication and collaboration with stakeholders, and allocates resources necessary for the successful selection, implementation, and evaluation of a school violence prevention program.
AKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In the preparation of my dissertation I have received invaluable help from numerous individuals. I want to first thank my parents, for they were my first teachers who provided me with a foundation of faith, love, hard work, and generosity. I have been so blessed by your example and your willingness to make sacrifices for me in order that I may pursue my dreams.

I would especially like to express my gratitude to Dr. Anthony Colella, my mentor, who has so many gifts and shares them so freely. I was truly inspired, encouraged and challenged by you to do my best. Seton Hall University is blessed by your commitment and guidance to students in their quest for knowledge, the truth, and personal growth so that they may reach out to others.

To my committee members: Dr. Osnato, your enthusiasm and dedication to the advancement of educational leadership is inspiring. To my superintendent, Dr. Montesano, your example of creating a community that focuses on making a positive difference in people’s lives through collaborative efforts is truly special. To Dr. DiGiacomo, your friendship over the years and sincere interest and encouragement to chase my dreams has been wonderful.

I am so grateful to my siblings for all their encouragement and involvement in the profession of education. To my brother Eddie, my sister Christy, my brother Brendan, and my sister Jeannie, I thank you for your guidance, your love and your daily witness of what it truly means to be a friend, a parent, and a teacher.
A special word of thanks goes to Mom and Dad Hajek, Audrey Petersen, Tom Kearney, Tessa Petersen, John Tenaglia, Ted and Eva Hajek, Jason and Maeve Hajek, and all of my nieces and nephews for being such supportive family members.

Above all, I want to thank God because it was through His grace and the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit that enabled me to finish my dissertation.
DEDICATION

To my wife, Karen Ann Petersen, you are the love of my life. I am deeply grateful for all of your prayers, patience and assistance in completing my dissertation. I am so blessed to have a wife who is so supportive and enthusiastic for all of my dreams. Your example of servant leadership provides me with a great model to emulate each day. As the future unfolds, I am optimistic that through the power of “3”, we will do great things. I love you and dedicate my dissertation to you.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS** .......................................................... ii

**DEDICATION** ........................................................................ iv

**I. INTRODUCTION** ................................................................. 1

  Background of the Problem ....................................................... 1
  Statement of the Problem ........................................................ 12
  Purpose of the Study .............................................................. 14
  Research Questions ............................................................... 15
  Limitations ............................................................................ 15
  Significance of the Study ........................................................ 16
  Definition of Terms .................................................................. 17
  Organization of Study ............................................................. 21

**II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE** ................................. 23

  Introduction ........................................................................... 24
  School Violence Statistics ......................................................... 25
  The Causes and Effects of School Violence ................................... 27
  The Response of the School Organization ...................................... 33
  The Shift to Small School Reform ............................................... 35
  The Role of the Superintendent ................................................ 38
  Curriculum ............................................................................. 42
  Teachers’ Perceptions of Decision-making Practices of Superintendent 45
  The Use of Scientific Based Research ......................................... 48
  The Use of Evaluation Criteria ................................................... 49
  Summary .................................................................................. 50

**III. METHODOLOGY** ................................................................. 51

  Overview ............................................................................... 51
  Research Sample ..................................................................... 52
  Research Design ...................................................................... 52
  Techniques for Data Collection and Analysis .............................. 54
  Development of Interview Instrument and Interview Questions .... 56
  Interview Questions .................................................................. 57
  Focus Group Questions ........................................................... 58
  Treatment of Data .................................................................... 60
  Summary .................................................................................. 61
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Background of the Problem

School violence is an issue that has taken center stage in American education over the last 10 years. Since the shootings in 1999 at Columbine High School in Colorado that left 15 people dead, to the recent school shooting in Minnesota on March 21, 2005, that left 10 people dead, to the terrorist attacks on a school in Russia on September 1, 2004, that left 338 people dead, to the approval of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation by Congress in 2001; all schools have been placed under the microscope in defining how a safe and secure school environment is to be achieved. There seems to be no simple solution or single remedy to this complex problem. School superintendents face tough decisions when guiding administrators in selecting, implementing, and evaluating school violence prevention programs because of the ever-growing uncertainty and skepticism of whether a program actually works and is cost-effective (Strover & Batch, 2005).

According to the National Association of State Boards of Education's (NASBE, 1994) report: "Violence, whether it be inside or outside of schools, deadens spirit, creates a nihilistic environment, and leads many young people to believe that their future is so bleak that education simply doesn’t matter" (p. 3). The Center for the Prevention of School Violence (CPSV) defined school violence as: "any behavior that violates a school’s educational mission or climate of respect or jeopardizes the intent
of the school to be free of aggression against persons or property, drugs, weapons, disruptions, and disorder” (CPSV, 2005). School administrators across the country acknowledge that a safe and secure school environment is essential to maximize learning (DeVoe et al., 2003). Elmore (2000) stated: “Schools are being asked by elected officials – policy makers, if you will – to do things they are largely unequipped to assume, and the risks and consequences of failure are high for everyone, but especially for children” (p. 2).

The vast majority of schools do have existing safety programs. However, what is unclear is whether or not these programs are deemed to be effective or even hopeful (Juvonen, 2001). Many of these programs have evolved from quick-fix interventions to full-scale, multi-dimensional programs focusing on particular issues within an individual school system (Plamency, 1998). Because school violence prevention programs have increased faster than the availability for solid research, educators struggle to determine what programs are reducing school violence (Greenberg et al., 2003).

Since the tragedy of Columbine, the public has been more concerned with the safety and security of our schools. The media has been scrutinizing the decision-making practices of many school officials to determine what measures have been taken to reduce the risk of school violence. Brower and Belch (2005) state in their book Transformational Leadership and Decision Making in Schools:

...in an era of high expectations for accountability and entitlement among school stakeholders, decisions can quickly backfire and blow up in the face of school leaders with profound adverse effects. At every juncture of decision-
making, it appears that school leaders are being criticized for their decisions by any one of the number of individuals or institutions, including their own employees. (p. 3).

The top-down design of school districts and the accountability movement in education places great pressure on superintendents to make decisions that will comply with the standards set forth in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001) legislation. The average urban superintendent in 2003 held his position for 2.75 years (Council of the Great City Schools, 2003). Statistics suggest that a superintendent’s ability to make decisions that will improve school safety and academic achievement will ultimately determine his or her longevity in the position of superintendent.

The vast majority of outsiders are confused and a bit vague on what role a superintendent actually serves (Lashway, 2002). The ambiguity of the position of superintendent and of their decision-making practices when it involves curricula for school violence prevention leads to confused and at times negative feelings between the administration, faculty, and community. If a superintendent, school board, principals and teachers cannot work together, a school system will likely fail (Andero, 2000).

With so much on the line between high-stakes testing and the threat of school violence, school leaders are “...in a position to distribute power and influence in such a way that supports the capacity to continuously improve schools” (Carter, & Cunningham, 1997, p. 16) The role of the superintendent will have the greatest impact on the decisions made in a district to develop strong curriculum policies for a
safe and sound learning environment (Carter & Cunningham, 1997). Andero (2000) noted that:

…the superintendent is the liaison between the school board and state educational leadership. Superintendent filters state curriculum policy mandates to the school board. The school board, who is responsible for local education, acts in concert with the superintendent. Most school boards are deficient in technical knowledge of education. Therefore, school board affirms the professionally based decisions of the superintendent. (p. 1)

The superintendent is the most influential person in forming and implementing curriculum policy. Therefore, superintendents’ decision-making for school violence prevention programs should not be randomly selected but research based to fit the needs of a district (Dussenbury & Weissberg, 1998).

Public education today is a result of more than a century of reform and revision. In each era, visionary individuals such as Horace Mann, John Dewey, Booker T. Washington, and Deborah Meier, to name a few, have taken the lead and transformed the system to meet the needs of their students. Today, the public school systems are trying to do much the same. However, the challenges that school leaders face today are quite different from the challenges faced by Horace Mann. According to much research and evidence, decisions that school leaders face today encompass a society that has a “me first” attitude (Beck, 1998; Dore, 1995; Miel, 1996). This shifting paradigm of attitudes has led to a rise in incidences of school violence. Students know that negative behavior requires more attention than positive behavior.
Consequently, negative behavior more often affects decision-making than positive behavior.

The role of superintendents has dramatically changed over the last 25 years. Superintendents now face the challenge of shifting demographics, the emphasis on test scores and accountability, the decentralization of power, the breakdown of the family, the influx of technology into the classroom, and the privatization of education through vouchers, charter schools and home schooling (Houston, 2001). In addition, Johnson (1996) states that:

a superintendent should assess a district’s needs, devise solutions to its problems, take charge of its policies and practices, provide support to its principals intent on improving their schools, inspire confidence among teachers and ensure compliance by the reluctant and recalcitrant. (p. xi)

It is clear that education can no longer be managed on a micro level but now must focus on the big picture. The big picture involves the decision-making practice of superintendents as it relates to implementing new curriculum, improving relationships, sharing power, and preparing for the changing dynamics of school violence.

School violence is an issue that impacts all of society. School violence is a disruption for students, teachers, and administrators in the educational process plus may result in long-term effects of adolescent aggression. According to the National Center for Children Exposed to Violence (NCCEV, 2004), students who antagonize other students by bullying are more likely to become adult criminals. Because of the
complexity of school violence, root causes of student behaviors are difficult to
determine. What happens to a child before their first day of school or what happens to
a child once school has started can be difficult to determine.

According to the *Best Practices of Youth Violence Prevention: A Sourcebook
for Community Action* (Thorton, Craft, Dahlberg, Lynch, & Baer, 2002), children and
adolescents with risk factors include:

(a) History of early aggression

(b) Social or learning problems

(c) Exposure to violence whether it be at home, in their
   neighborhood, or in the media

(d) Parental drug or alcohol use

(e) Friends who engage in problem behavior

(f) Academic failure or poor commitment to school

(g) Poverty

(h) Recent family disruptions such as divorce or relocation

(i) Access to firearms

(j) Use of alcohol or other drugs in the past.

School districts struggle to reach out to these students because of the lack of effective
research based programs. Since Congress passed the *No Child Left Behind* (2001)
legislation: administrators, teachers and community officials have been trying to understand and develop comprehensive research based prevention programs that would reduce school violence. However, school districts have not been adequate in doing so as evidenced in the number of failing districts across the country (Toppo, 2006).

The terms research-based, evidence-based and scientifically based research has been used in the field of education to describe programs that are supported with data. Because the definitions of these terms often vary, confusion can take place in that they are being applied equally to studies that have varied in scientific rigor (National Staff Development Council, NSDC, 2004). The NCLB Act (2001) defines scientifically based research as:

Research that involves the application of rigorous, systematic, and objective procedures to obtain reliable and valid knowledge relevant to education activities and programs; and includes research that:

1. Employs systematic, empirical methods that draw on observation or experiment;
2. Involves rigorous data analysis that are adequate to test the stated hypothesis and justify the general conclusions drawn;
3. Relies on measurements or observational methods that provide reliable and valid data across evaluators and observers, across multiple measurements and observations, and across studies by the same or different investigators;
4. Is evaluated using experimental or quasi-experimental designs in which individuals, entities, programs, or activities are assigned to different conditions and with appropriate controls to evaluate the effects of the condition of interest, with a preference for random assignment experiments, or other designs to the extent that those designs contain within condition or across condition;

5. Ensures that experimental studies are presented in sufficient detail and clarity to allow for replication, or, at a minimum, offer the opportunity to build systematically on their findings; and

6. Has been accepted by a peer-reviewed journal or approved by a panel of independent experts through a comparably rigorous, objective, and scientific review. (pp. 126-127)

According to a summary of findings compiled in "Scientifically Based Research," Beghetto (2003) defines scientifically based research as including persuasive research (peer review), empirical data, important questions, appropriate methods and replicable and applicable findings. The NCLB legislation focuses on scientific based research.

To ensure an environment that provides for optimal learning, administrators and teachers must maintain a vision of safety and security. In applying research-based practices that may recognize early warning signs for potentially violent students, schools will be able to attend to the needs of those students whom are at risk to commit harm in an educational setting (Vermeire, 2002). Awareness of potentially
violent behavior and early intervention are crucial components in helping students at risk.

At the same time of trying to prevent acts of violence, school systems must be equally concerned and prepared to council students who are victims of school violence. Children often will keep quiet about episodes of victimization due to shame, embarrassment, and fear of escalated violence (Thompson & McClintock, 1998). School violence can include “emotional and physical ridicule or bullying, assaults, threats, sexual offenses, as well as the less apparent but equally important components of graffiti and vandalism, trespassing and gangs” (NCCEV, 2004, p. 1). Children who are victims in school crimes often experience one or more of the following symptoms: decreased self-esteem, truancy, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and in extreme cases, suicide and violent retaliation (NCCEV, 2004).

In most cases, violence reflects the environment in which students live. Urban districts with large student populations tend to have more problems than rural districts with large populations. The type of violence also changes with the dynamics of a district. Children who have experienced or witnessed violent behavior tend to resort to violence because of its familiarity. This being said, superintendents need to work with principals and teachers to examine early childhood behavior and try to correct what has often curtailed into an ongoing cycle of violent behavior. Support is critical in the early stages as well as later stages in counseling students who have been victims of school violence (Diamant & Luiselli, 2002).
While researchers have been struggling to streamline data to determine the effectiveness of school violence prevention programs, most superintendents continue to support programs that are not research based (Flannery, 1998). As funds tighten in public education, funders may not support programs without quality evaluation data that clearly demonstrates the overall effectiveness of a program both in the short term and long term. Because of the lack of resources needed to research and collect data, there is very little empirical evidence suggesting the overall effectiveness of most programs (Flannery, 1998).

Awareness of the needs of a school, implementation and evaluation should be taken into consideration before programs are adopted. Superintendents will need to communicate a positive message to communities that safety awareness and prevention programs are statistically supported. Many superintendents have been searching out comprehensive approaches that utilize all constituencies in a community to take an active part in reducing school violence (Caplan & Weissberg, 1998).

Communities are becoming more aware of the policies set forth in the No Child Left Behind Legislation (NCLB) of 2001. According to the NCLB, a new policy was passed stating that options were to be available for parents whose child is attending an “unsafe school.” The Unsafe School Choice Policy is as follows:

Each State receiving funds under this Act shall establish and implement a statewide policy requiring that a student attending a persistently dangerous public elementary school or secondary school, as determined by the State in
consultation with a representative sample of local educational agencies, or who becomes a victim of a violent criminal offense, as determined by State law, while in or on the grounds of a public elementary school or secondary school that the student attends, be allowed to attend a safe public elementary school or secondary school within the local educational agency, including a public charter school. (p. 1)

The NCLB (2001) suggests that if schools are unable to create an environment that is secure for students then schools will have to exercise the “Unsafe School” option. This option places pressure on the decision making practice of superintendents because of the negative publicity a district will encounter as well as the risk of losing funding and students for the district.

The New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) is currently utilizing 14 intervention and prevention programs (NJDOE, 2004). The goal of the NJDOE is to minimize school violence through professional training seminars for school administrators and support personnel, to improve Internet-based reporting system that will allow for data analysis (NJDOE, 2004). The NJDOE’s Annual Report on Violence, Vandalism and Substance Abuse in New Jersey Public Schools 2002-03 provides detailed information on the latest violence in schools. This information helps the state determine where it will allocate its resources.

The 2002-2003 report marked the fourth year of using the Electronic Violence and Vandalism Reporting System (EVVRS) as its main instrument to track school violence in New Jersey. The EVVRS provides the Legislature with four broad categories: violence, vandalism, weapons, and substance abuse. Since its inception,
the EVVRS has shown that New Jersey has had a small drop in the number of incidents of violence but a modest increase in the number of weapons incidents whereas vandalism and substance abuse has changed very little (NJDOE, 2004). The NJDOE is working to enhance many of its school safety programs.

The adage “Fail to plan, plan to fail” certainly applies to the decision-making practices of a superintendent in selecting school violence prevention programs for his or her district. Effective programs should not be the sole responsibility of the superintendent but include input from principals, supervisors, teachers, students, parents, and school personnel. By doing so, shared decision-making practices will incorporate ongoing checks for prevention and intervention strategies (Feinberg, 2002). Armed with this understanding, superintendents can make effective decisions for school violence prevention programs that will include critical response and coordination between community and school personnel in the event of school violence (Feinberg, 2002).

Statement of the Problem

In the past, there have been many attempts to reform and restructure curricula in our public schools to prevent school violence. Today, school administrators continue to do the same but now must focus on so many new issues that were unthinkable 50 years ago. With the threat of terrorism, the school shooter, gangs and weapons, superintendents are facing a daunting dilemma. Trying to predict which students are more likely to commit acts of violence against their classmates and/or trying to identify what areas of a school building are vulnerable to attack has become an alarming problem (Guetteloe, 2000).
There are several so-called model programs that have been adopted by superintendents and principals as well as many programs that have been created on the local level and written into the curriculum of schools. The vast majority of these programs have been inadequate in addressing problem behaviors when measured against the criteria set forth by the United States Department of Education (Crosse et al., 2002). The NCLB (2001) legislation has made it clear that schools must do more to ensure safety.

The public is often misinformed by negative media coverage that often leads the public to believing that our schools are no longer safe. This type of negative communication between the media and public has trickled down into our school systems. There is little doubt that the leadership of our school systems must do more in order to be prepared to address crisis situations and school violence. Whenever a crisis occurs, the first questions asked are “Why did this happen?” and “How could this have been prevented?” The superintendent must be able to address these questions. The response to these questions and the districts overall preparedness for crisis situations will be scrutinized by the media, faculty, and community.

The superintendent must be able to communicate to the public that the decisions made in the past to prevent school violence and crisis situations were thorough and supported by research. If a superintendent’s decisions-making practices are unclear and do not involve the collaboration of stakeholders in the educational process, the chances for success are lessened. Poor communication, collaboration, and organization of resources by a superintendent will most likely result in the failure of school violence prevention programs.
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was two-fold. The first purpose of this study was to investigate the decision-making practices of three superintendents in Northern New Jersey in selecting school violence prevention programs to determine if the programs were data driven and research based. The second purpose of this study was to investigate how teachers perceived their input on the decision-making practices of their superintendent in the selection of school violence prevention programs.

Three superintendents were interviewed to understand what measures had been taken on their behalf in selecting school violence prevention programs. The interviews were designed to qualitatively assess if researched based programs had been adopted and evaluated. Three focus groups of teachers were formed because of their in-depth understanding of the classroom and of the ever-changing school environment. It is intended that the analysis of the teachers’ focus group discussions will assist in understanding why programs in the past have been adopted and whether or not these programs are effective. The focus groups will provide important information as to how much input the teachers had in developing curriculum for school violence prevention and or choosing existing research based prevention programs.

Since the school shootings of Columbine in 1999, to the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, to the terrorist attacks on a school in Russia on September 1, 2004, to the school shooting in Minnesota on March 21, 2005, it is clear that all facets of a community must be on alert. A superintendent’s decision-making process will continue to play an intricate role in reducing and managing
school violence. The findings of this study can be helpful for superintendents and administrators in selecting school violence prevention programs that are most effective as proven through research and that have been endorsed by teachers.

Research Questions

1. How do superintendents utilize data from within their district to select and implement curricula for school violence prevention?

2. How do superintendents evaluate a school violent prevention program that is research based and/or a school violence prevention program that is not researched based?

3. How do teachers perceive their input on decision-making practices of a superintendent on curricula for school violence prevention?

Limitations

This study will be limited in terms of its scope and research design. The results will be limited to three superintendents in the state of New Jersey and three focus groups. The research is restricted to the decision-making practices of superintendents on curricula for only school violence prevention programs. Correspondingly, the focus groups were formed from volunteers of one of the three districts in which a superintendent had been interviewed. The focus groups were limited to eight questions regarding their perceptions of how the district went about making decisions in selecting school violence prevention programs. The teachers that participated were from elementary, middle, and high schools. The teachers involved did not represent the entire population of their district.
Significance of the Study

In the past, school systems have adopted several different programs in order to combat the problem of school violence and alleviate growing concerns that students are no longer safe and secure. Unfortunately, while doing so, schools have been unable to prove the overall effectiveness of many of these programs. In fact, Juvonen (2001) states,

At this time, only a handful of violence prevention approaches have been evaluated, and even fewer have been determined to be effective or promising. Proper evaluation research is costly and typically deemed a luxury by funders and program developers. As a result, large amounts of both federal and state monies are spent to support school violence programs with little or no data on their potential effectiveness.

Since there is little data to support effective research based programs, school administrators struggle to select, implement, and evaluate school violence prevention programs. Hence, when a crisis situation occurs, superintendents, because of their leadership role within a district will have to respond to a plethora of questions regarding what measures had been taken by the district to ensure the safety of the students, teachers, and school personnel. Superintendents will have to ask themselves what role they played in developing and/or selecting curriculum for school violence prevention and/or advising building level administrators to be proactive in responding to warning signs. In addition, superintendents will face the scrutiny of the media, faculty, and community in an ongoing investigation into what led to the build up of an outbreak of school violence.
Given the numerous programs and data on school violence, this study will aim to focus on the decision-making practices of superintendents for school violence prevention. Since there is little research on what role a superintendent plays in school violence prevention, the results from this study can offer suggestions for more research and more professional development to groups of superintendents, building level administrators and teachers when it involves curricula and/or programs for school violence prevention. A wide variety of policy issues exist with the selection, implementation and evaluation of student conduct, which will impact decisions made by boards of education. This study will aim to provide data necessary to improve lines of communication between students, teachers, administrators and superintendents in order that schools may be more aware of potential risk factors.

Teachers who participated in focus group discussions yielded findings and recommendations useful to superintendents and districts interested in finding out what are some of the root causes for school violence. In addition, teachers provided important data revealing a disconnect between the trenches of the classroom and decision-making headquarters of central office. The results of this study can offer suggestions for superintendents when making decisions for school violence prevention and/or other programs. These suggestions will focus on the need to select and implement programs that are research-based, that match the needs of a district and that include an ongoing evaluation process.

**Definition of Terms**

**At school/at your school:** includes activities that happened in school buildings, on school grounds, on school buses, and at places that held school-sponsored events or
activities. Unless otherwise specified, respondents were requested to report on activities that occurred during normal school hours or when school activities/events were in session (National Center for Educational Statistics, NCES, 2003).

Crimes: any violation of a statute or regulation or any act the government has determined in injurious to the public, including felonies and misdemeanors. Such violation may or may not involve violence, and it may affect individuals or property (NCES, 2003).

Extremist group: a group that espouses radical beliefs and practices, which may include a religious component, that are widely seen as threatening the basic values and cultural norms of society at large (NCES, 2003).

Firearm/explosive device: any weapon that is designed to (or may readily be converted to) expel a projectile by the action of an explosive. This includes guns, bombs, grenades, mines, rockets, missiles, pipe bombs, or similar devices designed to explode and capable of causing bodily harm or property damage (NCES, 2003).

Gang: an ongoing loosely organized association of three or more persons, whether formal or informal, that has a common name, signs, symbols or colors, whose members engage, either individually or collectively, in violent or other forms of illegal behavior (NCES, 2003).

Incident: a specific criminal act or offense involving one or more victims and one or more offenders (NCES, 2003).

Insubordination: a deliberate and inexcusable defiance of or refusal to obey a school rule, authority, or a reasonable order. It includes but is not limited to direct defiance of school authority, failure to attend assigned detention or on-campus supervision.
failure to respond to a call slip, and physical or verbal intimidation/abuse (NCES, 2003).

**Intimidation:** to frighten, compel, or deter by actual or implied threats. It includes bullying and sexual harassment (NCES, 2003).

**Physical attack or fight:** an actual and intentional touching or striking of another person against his or her will, or the intentional causing of bodily harm to an individual (NCES, 2003).

**Rape:** forced sexual intercourse (vaginal, anal, or oral penetration). Includes penetration from a foreign object (NCES, 2003).

**Robbery:** the taking or attempting to take anything of value that is owned by another person or organization, under confrontational circumstances by force or threat of force or violence and/or by putting the victim in fear. A key difference between robbery and theft/larceny is that a threat or battery is involved in robbery (NCES, 2003).

**School:** an education institution consisting of one or more of grades K through 12 (NCES, 2003).

**School crime:** any criminal activity that is committed on school property (NCES, 2003).

**Scientifically based research:** research that involves the application of rigorous, systematic, and objective procedures to obtain reliable and valid knowledge relevant to education activities and programs (NCLB, 2001).
Serious violent incidents: include rape, sexual battery other than rape, physical attacks or fights with a weapon, threats of physical attack with a weapon, and robbery with or without a weapon (NCES, 2003).

Sexual battery: an incident that includes threatened rape, fondling, indecent liberties, child molestation, or sodomy. Principals were instructed that classification of these incidents should take into consideration the age and developmentally appropriate behavior of the offenders (NCES, 2003).

Sexual harassment: unsolicited, offensive behavior that inappropriately asserts sexuality over another person. The behavior may be verbal or non-verbal (NCES, 2003).

Specialized school: a school that is specifically for students who were referred for disciplinary reasons. The school may also have students who were referred for other reasons. The school may be at the same location as the respondent’s school (NCES, 2003).

Theft/larceny: taking things over $10 without personal confrontation. The unlawful taking of another person’s property without personal confrontation, threat, violence, or bodily harm. Included are pocket picking, stealing purse or backpack (if left unattended or no force was used to take it from owner), theft from a building, theft from a motor vehicle or motor vehicle parts or accessories, theft of bicycles, theft from vending machines, and all other types of thefts (NCES, 2003).

Vacationalism: the willful damage or destruction of school property including bombing, arson, graffiti, and other acts that cause property damage. Includes damage caused by computer hacking (NCES, 2003).
Violent incidents: include rape, sexual battery other than rape, physical attacks or fights with or without a weapon, threats of physical attack with or without a weapon, robbery with or without a weapon (NCES, 2003).

Weapon: any instrument or object used with the intent to threaten, injure, or kill. Includes look-alikes if they are used to threaten others (NCES, 2003).

Organization of Study

Chapter 1 provided an overview of this two-fold study. First, the researcher introduced the complexities of school violence and the difficulties facing superintendents when making decisions for selecting, implementing and evaluating school violence prevention programs. Second, the researcher provided rationale for why focus group discussions of teachers were conducted and how their perceptions may factor into the decision-making practices of the superintendent. Chapter 1 is broken down into the following sections: (a) the background of the problem, (b) changing dynamics of leadership, (c) statement of problem, (d) purpose of study, (e) research questions, (f) significance of the study, (g) limitations, and (h) definition of terms.

Chapter 2 presents the literature and research relevant to the topic of study. This chapter is organized into the following sections: (a) an introduction of the current levels and perceptions of school violence, (b) a list of school violence statistics are shown to highlight some of the current trends in education, (c) the causes and effects of school violence, (d) the response of the school organization, (e) the shift to small school reform, (f) the leadership of the superintendent, (g) the preparedness and response of districts to incidences of violence and crisis situations,
(h) a superintendent’s decision-making practices for curriculum, (i) teacher’s perceptions of the decision-making practices of a superintendent, (j) the use of scientific-based research for school violence prevention, and (k) an evaluation criterion to assess a school violence prevention program within a district. The chapter closes with a summary of school violence.

Chapter 3 presents the methodology for this study. This chapter is divided into the following sections: (a) overview, (b) research sample, (c) research design, (d) techniques for data collection and analysis, (e) development of interview instrument and interview questions, (f) focus group questions, and (g) treatment of data.

Chapter 4 contains the presentation and analysis of data, the transcript of each interview and how it was treated as well as a summary of the focus group discussions is provided.

Chapter 5 summarizes the data that was collected in this study and makes recommendations for future research. This chapter is divided into the following sections: (a) introduction, (b) summary of study, (c) findings in research, (d) implications, (e) recommendations for future research, (f) policy recommendations and (g) concluding remarks.

The final part of this research paper included the list of references and appendices.
Chapter II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The purpose of this study was two-fold. The first purpose of this study was to investigate the decision-making practices of three superintendents in northern New Jersey in selecting school violence prevention programs to determine if programs were data driven and research based. The second purpose of this study was to investigate how teachers perceived their input on decision-making practices of their superintendents in the selection of school violence prevention programs.

The purpose of this chapter is to present the literature and research relevant to the topic of study. This chapter is organized into different sections. First, an introduction of the current levels and perceptions of school violence is presented. Second, school violence statistics are shown to highlight some of the current trends in education. Third, the causes and effects of school violence are examined. The fourth section focuses on the response of the school organization. In this section, the leadership of the superintendent is reviewed to assess their preparedness and response to incidences of violence and crisis situations. In addition, a superintendent’s decision-making practices for curriculum are investigated. The next section examines the teacher’s perceptions of the decision-making practices of a superintendent. The last section focuses on the use of scientific-based research for school violence prevention and an evaluation criterion to assess a school violence prevention program within a district. In this section, the data reviewed reveal
that there is a need for more research in the area of school violence prevention. The last section of the chapter closes with a summary of school violence.

Introduction

The unprecedented acts of violence and terrorism in schools over the last decade have caught the attention of the entire world. Recurrent media coverage of school tragedies from Russia to Columbine has resulted in an element of fear for administrators, teachers, parents, and students. In the journal of a school shooter from Pearl, Mississippi, Luke Woodham, 16, wrote, "I am not insane. I am not angry. I am not spoiled or lazy, for murder is not weak and slowwitted, murder is gutsy and daring...I killed because people like me are mistreated everyday...I am malicious because I am miserable" (Dedman, 2000, p.9). With extensive media attention to why schools have failed to meet the needs of students and the heightening alert of terrorist threats against our society, there is reason to believe that schools are ill prepared and vulnerable to escalated acts of school violence, terrorism and alienation (Trump & Lavarello, 2003).

School violence has prompted massive media coverage of isolated incidences. Because of this negative publicity, the public believes that school violence is spinning out of control. According to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency, this is not the case as reports show that the juvenile violent crime rate in 1999 was the lowest in a decade despite an 8% growth of juvenile population from 1993 to 1999 (Snyder, 2000). These statistics are important because schools have made some strides in reducing the number of incidences. Schools must continue to be proactive. In comparison to 25 other countries with democracies, the United States youth violence crime rate is an estimated
two times greater (Mendel, 2000). With this in mind and recent tragic events at schools, educators and parents have become more concerned with what causes school violence and what are the short-term and long-term effects (Skiba & Peterson, 1999).

School Violence Statistics

According to National Center for Educational Statistics (2003), recent school violence statistics are as follows:

(a) In 2003, students ages 12-18 were more likely to be victims of theft at school than away from school and were more likely to be victims of serious violence away from school than at school.

(b) From July 1, 2001, through June 30, 2002, there were 17 homicides and 5 suicides of school-age youth (ages 5-19) at school.

(c) Annually, from 1999 through 2003, teachers were the victims of approximately 183,000 total nonfatal crimes at school, including 119,000 thefts and 65,000 violent crimes. On average, these figures translate into an annual rate of 39 crimes per 1,000 teachers, including 25 thefts and 14 violent crimes per 1,000 teachers.

(d) Middle schools were more likely than primary and secondary schools to report racial tensions, bullying, verbal abuse of teachers, and widespread disorder in classrooms in 1999-2000. For example, 43% of middle schools reported daily or weekly student bullying, compared with 26% of primary and 25% of secondary schools.

(e) In 2003, 21% of students ages 12-18 reported that street gangs were present at their school during the previous 6 months.
(f) In 2003, 29% of students in Grades 9-12 reported that someone had offered, sold, or given them an illegal drug on school property in the 12 months before the survey.

(g) In 2003, 36% of students ages 12-18 reported that they had seen hate-related graffiti at their school.

(h) In 2003, 45% of students in Grades 9-12 consumed at least one drink of alcohol anywhere in the last 30 days, and 5% consumed at least one drink on school property in the last 30 days. In 2003, 22% of students in Grades 9-12 reported using marijuana anywhere in the last 30 days, and 6% of students reported using marijuana on school property in the last 30 days.

(i) In 2003, students ages 12-18 in urban schools were more likely than students in suburban and rural schools to fear being attacked both at school or on the way to and from school, and away from school. 10% of students in urban schools feared being attacked at school, compared to 5% each of their peers in suburban and rural schools.

(j) In 1999-2000, about 54% of public schools took at least one serious disciplinary action against a student, amounting to about 1,163,000 actions. Of those serious disciplinary actions, 83% were suspensions for 5 days or more, 11% were removals with no services, and 7% were transfers to specialized schools.
According to the (2002) U.S. Department of Education’s study, *Wide Scope, Questionable Quality*, schools generally consulted a number of sources in selecting prevention programs, yet they typically placed a lower priority on research-based programs. The statistics below suggest an insufficient use of research.

(a) Perhaps as a result of the limited use of research-based information, only one third of the prevention activities used methods or approaches found to be effective in the research literature. Therefore, many programs lack statistical data to support their overall effectiveness.

(b) Research-based information was among the less frequently used sources for activity selection. Formal outcome evaluations and publications summarizing research were used in the selection of 28% and 38% of activities, respectively.

(c) On average, schools used two resources to select a given prevention activity. The resources most often used to select a prevention activity were other program providers (57% of activities) and meetings within the school district (Crosse et al., 2002).

The statistics paint a clear picture that school violence is a serious problem and that there is insufficient amount of data supporting research-based programs. The next section will focus on some of the causes and effects behind the statistics of school violence.

The Causes and Effects of School Violence

Violence in schools can have devastating effects on students, parents, school personnel, and the community. Because adolescents experience a wide range of feelings and emotions, school personnel can have a difficult time zeroing in on “at-risk” students.
According to the North Carolina State Board of Education (NCSBE, 2000), an “at risk” student is:

...a young person who because of a wide range of individual, personal, financial, family, social, behavioral or academic circumstances, may experience school failure or other unwanted outcomes unless interventions occur to reduce the risk factors. Circumstances which often place students at risk may include, but are not limited to: not meeting state/local proficiency standards, grade retention; unidentified or inadequately addressed learning needs, alienation from school life; unchallenging curricula and/or instruction, tardiness and or poor school attendance; negative peer influence; unmanageable behavior; substance abuse and other health risk behaviors, abuse and neglect; inadequate parental/family and/or school support; and limited English proficiency.

These students who are at risk and need help are often ignored and or feel alienated. The term “alienation” is defined as: “being cut off from society and not accepting society’s norms, or standards of behavior” (Ragland & Saxon, 1981, p. 499).

Adolescence is a time of vulnerability and struggle for acceptance, as well as a time of questioning one’s state of dependency. Understanding adolescent personality development is extremely important in assessing the relationship between alienation and a student’s conduct. Personalities shape how people see the world and themselves and how they interact with others. Much of an adolescent’s interaction or lack of interaction occurs at home, in school and in social settings (Loeber & Farrington, 2000). It takes a great deal of time and observation to develop an impression of an individual’s
personality. Therefore, it makes sense that many times patterns of anti-social and violent behavior are not weeded out before a student snaps and commits terrible acts of violence.

The “school shooter” is an example of school violence, which led to 15 deaths in Columbine High School in Colorado. A vast number of behavioral characteristics and traits fall under the umbrella of the school shooter. Alienation is just one characteristic among many. Glasser (2000b) claimed that the “inability to relate or connect is a problem for everyone in our society” (p. 79). He explained how this inability is the root cause of marital, family, school and workplace problems (Glasser, 2000b). A lack of connection and forming of relations can lead to an act of alienating oneself or a condition of being alienated. Researchers have attempted to unveil very specific answers regarding the psychological state of the school shooter. Alienation does not stand alone, but proves to be a relevant finding supported by other characteristics, necessary for further study of the school shooter.

Identifying the causes of alienation, as well as all possible traits and characteristics of the school shooter, is a key factor in building a safer environment in schools. The availability of guns depicted in films, videos and music have been blamed (Oshiyama & Raywid, 2000). Some analysts have turned their vision towards parental failure, while others have focused on the power of hate groups (Oshiyama & Raywid, 2000). Whatever the findings may be, there is probably truth in many of these explanations and interpretations of why school shooters pull the trigger. School administrators must try to connect with those students under our care who are quiet, shy, depressed, or withdrawn (Reilly & Martin, 1996). Although these students may not
behave like the aggressive, acting-out child we may be used to, they may still have the capacity to act in an aggressive and even fatal manner (Reilly & Martin, 1996).

To predict behavior or circumstances that lead to violent acts is difficult. Take for example the events of September 11, 2001. Thousands went to work that sunny morning, as they would have on any ordinary day. People innocently sat at their office desks in downtown Manhattan as tragedy hit, killing thousands. Though we intensely hope the magnitude of this horrific event in our country’s history never occurs again, school shootings carry a magnitude of their own in middle-class communities. As on September 11th, students similarly kissed their family members goodbye as they went off to school on April 20, 1999, in Littleton, Colorado (Dedman, 2000). Twelve innocent students and one teacher were killed that day, while others were wounded, and a community was left in shock. Yet, school shootings continue to occur, even in the aftermath of the events at Columbine High School. Guetzloe (2000) stated, “People who assumed previously that ‘it could never happen here’ now realize that a massacre can occur anywhere, not only in a lower-class ghetto in a big city but also in a small town or in an upper-middle-class suburban neighborhood” (p. 21).

In search of explanations supporting the causes of alienation among middle-class, predominately male adolescents, family dynamics must be analyzed. Oshiyama and Raywid (2000) reported that both at Columbine High School and at other schools in which multiple killings have occurred, the assassins have come from middle-class families. A potential key factor in the development of the alienated personality is that many contemporary parents lack appropriate social skills that are important if children are to progress normally through childhood years (Reilly & Martin, 1996). According to
Reilly and Martin, an antisocial, alienated child who does not receive appropriate attention and services by age 8 can present many serious problems to society as he or she ages and engages in more serious offenses. What many potential school shooters share is a lack of good and caring relationships with warm, responsible adults (Glasser, 2000b). Children and adolescents need to be nurtured, loved, and listened to.

In one particular study of 212 high school students, Sandhu (2000) reported 17 were identified as “trouble-makers” and potentially violent. Among these students’ characteristics, one major underlying theme was found: alienation. The study revealed that parental affection was denied to these students through “chance or choice” (Sandhu, 2000, p.82). It was by chance when a student’s parent(s) died, separated, or divorced; however, it was by choice when a parent(s) neglected or abandoned their child (Sandhu, 2000). Furthermore, the anger and pain some students in the study experienced was rooted in some form of abuse, either physical, sexual or combination of both (Sandhu, 2000).

Parental behaviors that fail to encompass secure emotional attachment may lead to delinquent and aggressive behaviors in adolescence (Rokach, 2000). Access to weapons and lack of monitoring of television and Internet can further increase risk of violent behavior. Rokach (2000) explains that many a criminal grows up as an alienated child, in a rejecting environment that lacks adequate support. When the child grows, the alienated adolescent cannot be integrated with peers. As a result of the need to increase self-esteem and ward off feelings of loneliness, the adolescent resorts to violence (Rokach, 2000).
School dynamics is a vital resource to understanding incidences of school violence. Oshiyama and Raywid (2000) examined evidence that violence is more likely to occur in larger schools than in small ones. Research has consistently found that students who attend small schools are less alienated than those who attend large schools (Oshiyama & Rawid, 2000). According to Oshiyama and Raywid (2000), in larger schools, where alienation often goes hand in hand with anonymity, there is more of a chance for potential problems. In large schools, with a growing population of students, there will be a higher degree of student alienation and formation of various sub-communities than school with small populations. At Columbine High School, a school large in size and diverse in population, the student assassins considered each other outcasts. Furthermore, certain groups of students were given more prestige than others. In an attempt to battle their feelings of alienation and rejection, the Columbine students joined together in an act of terrible measure. In many schools like Columbine, Oshiyama and Raywid (2000) report that many students remain virtually anonymous for their entire stay.

Reilly and Martin (1996) identified that individuals at risk for violent behavior have not felt connected to or been accepted by others. Youths may also deal with constant teasing, bullying, and ridiculing by their peers. These students often initially withdraw socially in an aim to self-protect from rejection and humiliation (Dwyer, Osher & Waiger, 1998). Many of these students develop feelings of intense anger and isolation. If not given adequate support in addressing these feelings, adolescents have the greater potential than those students whom received proper counseling to act out through
aggression and violence (Dwyer et al., 1998). Teachers, however, may also lack feelings of comfort when in the presence of an alienated student (Reilly & Martin, 1996).

Glasser (2000b) concluded that the majority of human problems exist as a result of toxic relationships, choices of dysfunctional behaviors, and a lack of responsibility. As we strive to identify the characteristics of the alienated adolescent, we sit before a puzzle of a thousand pieces. Sandhu (2000), along with many others, provided practical suggestions and strategies in an attempt to prevent school shootings, as well as all forms of school violence. Intervention and prevention should be a collaborative effort on behalf of parents, school administrative staff, psychologists, counselors, teachers, and other mental health professionals.

The Response of the School Organization

School districts have attempted to address the problem of school violence in various ways. There have been numerous programs created and implemented to prevent school violence. Intervention strategies have been both adopted from established programs and initiated from within school districts. A school promoting an environment where students can reach their potential implies a setting that is safe and secure and optimal for learning (Devoe et al., 2003). The United States Department of Education’s (1998) report Early Warning Timely Response: A Guide to Safe Schools, suggests that when administrators, teachers, parents, and communities work together, there is much promise for prevention and early intervention strategies to be effective.
Kenneth S. Trump, President and CEO of National School Safety and Security Services, suggests that communication is essential to promoting an environment where students feel safe and secure. Trump (2006) suggests,

...school safety and crisis preparedness planning are processes, not events.
Regular communication and awareness of safety-related issues will help keep these issues in the forefront while allowing educators to prevent paranoia and fear by sending balanced, rational messages during no-crisis times (p. 23).

The roles of individuals within a school district must be clear in the event of school violence and/or a crisis situation. School districts hierarchical design typically determines specific roles for administrators, teachers, school security officials, public information officials, secretaries and clerical staff, counselors, psychologists and other mental health professionals, custodians and maintenance staff, transportation staff, parents, and students. Superintendents and/or building administrators are important figures when selecting, implementing and evaluating school violence prevention programs and preparing for crisis situations (Trump, 2000).

In 2002, with the approval of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation by Congress, the federal government has placed all public schools under the microscope. If schools fail to meet the standards set by NCLB, then consequences will be forthcoming. One of the consequences that the federal government will put into action is the Unsafe School Choice Option. The Unsafe School Choice Policy (NCLB, 2001, Title IX, Part E, Subpart 2, SEC. 9532) is as follows:
Each State receiving funds under this Act shall establish and implement a statewide policy requiring that a student attending a persistently dangerous (see attachment) public elementary school or secondary school as determined by the State in consultation with a representative sample of local educational agencies, or who becomes a victim of a violent criminal offense, as determined by State law, while on the grounds of a public elementary school or secondary school that the student attends, be allowed to attend a safe public elementary school or secondary school within the local educational agency, including a public charter school.

The NCLB (2001) suggests that if schools are unable to create an environment that is secure for students then schools will have to exercise the “Unsafe School” option. This option places pressure on the decision making practice of superintendents because of the negative publicity a district will encounter as well as the risk of losing funding and students for the district.

The Shift to Small School Reform

Throughout the country, public schools are facing tremendous pressure to meet the standards established under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act. Interestingly, one initiative that had its roots during the early 1990s, which had been often ignored by policymakers until more recently, is small school reform. This shift has been dominant in many urban districts in the United States. Since the shootings at Columbine and other outbreaks of school violence at large high schools, the public’s perceptions were that the structures, daily routines, and impersonal relationships of large schools have created cultures where significant numbers of students are unengaged in the life of the school and
alienated from adults and one another” (Wasley & Lear, 2001, p.22). As a result, large schools are vulnerable to a plethora of problems.

The drive behind the small school initiative began with a study in Chicago titled, *Small Schools: Great Strides*. This study which began in 1990, focused on creating schools with a maximum student population of 400. Michelle Fine, one of the authors and researchers in the study, stated in her (2005) article titled: “Not in Our Name,” that

...our nation is facing a crisis in urban education that derives from multiple sources: a disappearing economy for poor and working-class people of color, mass incarceration of youth and adults of color, the under funding of urban schools, the No Child Left Behind act, lack of space, high-stakes testing, and politicized centrist bureaucracies that trust neither communities nor educators.

This litany of issues suggests that schools are at a crossroad and must make decisions based on research. According to Patricia Wasley and Richard Lear’s (2001) “Small Schools, Real Gains,” smaller schools are successful for the following reasons:

(a) Relationships between students and adults are strong and ongoing.
(b) Relationships with parents are strong and ongoing.
(c) The school’s organization is flat, with broadly distributed leadership.
(d) Most small schools do not attempt to be comprehensive.
(e) Professional development is ongoing, embedded, and site-specific.
(f) The school develops its own culture.
(g) Smaller schools engage the community in educating young people.
Despite the research, many districts with large schools are reluctant to make the transition to smaller learning communities. Wasley and Lear (2001) suggest that the barriers that exist are:

(a) Cultural expectations about high schools are deeply embedded.

(b) Schools attempting to become small do too little, too slowly.

(c) So-called small schools are not small enough.

(d) Small school act like large schools.

(e) Decision-makers focus only on short-term goals.

(f) Many mandates and practices favor larger schools and centralized operations.

(g) Educators lack images of small schools.

Clearly, the No Child Left Behind act places pressure on small schools to meet the standards set forth year after year. This is a dilemma for small schools because test scores, incidents of school violence, among other things can fluctuate tremendously when enrollments of schools are small (Au, 2005). School districts may have to exercise the "Unsafe School Choice Option Policy" if they cannot meet the standards. Since small school reform is one of the hottest trends in education, school districts are going to have to make a choice. Superintendents who may or may not be an advocate of small school reform may often make this choice. As the chief catalyst to improve a district’s mission, superintendents are in a position to advocate programs that will improve the overall learning and safety of a school district.
The Role of the Superintendent

At the top of this hierarchical structure in most school districts is the superintendent. The position of superintendent has evolved over the past 50 years in that what once gave superintendents a great deal of power has become more of a sharing of power. Because of state and federal policymakers, special interest groups, principals, teachers and parents, the superintendent’s authority has become limited and often challenged (Lashway, 2002). In many instances, the standards-based accountability movement in education has become one of the primary concerns for a superintendent in that he or she knows that their leadership and legacy will be judged upon the results on specific assessments. If this standards-based movement remains strong, it is likely that district leaders are going to be scrutinized for every decision and action he or she takes. As the job becomes more and more difficult, the pool of highly qualified candidates will most definitely result in a shortage (Houston, 2001).

Superintendents are under pressure to meet the needs of their students. According to Carter and Cunningham (1997):

The violence that has been afflicting society in general is slowly creeping into the schools. These changing social conditions have placed pressure on our schools to find ways to meet students’ needs. These and other growing demands have made the work of the superintendency much more complex, as they move education beyond its traditional boundaries. Issues creeping into the schools include intolerance, violence, homelessness, alcohol and drug abuse, physical and sexual abuse, sexually transmitted diseases such as AIDS, suicide, abortion, birth
control, condom distribution, and many other hot topics. In the face of these issues, a significantly large numbers of American youth are at risk of not realizing their potential, and superintendents are being challenged to ensure that this does not happen. (p.13)

Carter and Cunningham (1997) further state:

Superintendents may be unaware of the street activity of students attending the schools within their district. Such activity often remains highly confidential because of a lack of communication among schools, police, social services, and the courts. As a result, superintendents often misread the behavior of students. They see conflict and aggressive behavior as discrete incidents and overlook gang patterns that might be developing. This blindness can result in a superintendent looking as if he or she is out of touch or covering up critical incidents, not realizing what is going on until it is too late. By the time they come to understand the situation, the community has already lost confidence in the superintendent and withdrawn its support. (p. 114)

Certainly the potential risk factors exist in terms of school violence; however, with scientific-based research superintendents will have more data to base their decisions upon.

According to Lashway (2002), a superintendent’s primary role is to place instruction as its top priority. By improving instruction and communication within a district, the chances for success are much greater. Without the support and commitment to instruction, a superintendent will struggle to enhance the performance of a school
system. According to Bennis and Goldsmith (1997), "Leadership has begun to take on a new dimension. The leadership we are seeking is one that is empowering, supportive, visionary, problem-solving, creative, and shared" (p. xv). A superintendent is a leader who must "meet the needs of the changing population of students, who are affected as never before by the realities of shifting demographics, advancing technology, and the demands of an uncertain future" (Carter & Cunningham, 1997, p. 20).

The position of superintendent according to Cuban (1988) is broken down into different levels. First, a superintendent must work with teachers to improve pedagogy. By doing this and working closely with principals to improve instructional tactics in the classroom, teachers will be better equipped. Teachers will also benefit from superintendents who assist principals in understanding curriculum. This will cause a ripple effect in that the principal will share information with teachers and teachers will share information with students. At another level, the superintendent is responsible for shaping a mission for a district. This vision sets the tone for the school community and enables the superintendent to communicate to the different stakeholders the plans and goals for the district. Cuban suggests that a superintendent is seen as an instructional leader whose mission is consistent with the goals, standards, and curriculum of a district (Cuban, 1988).

A superintendent has the ability by virtue of access and control to make decisions that will ultimately impact the quality of education in a district (Johnson, 1996). The alliance between a superintendent and his or her district suggests that not much would happen if it were not for the active involvement of a superintendent (Hord, 1992).
Evidence has shown that there is a need for superintendents to actively engage in personal self-study and reflection. This type of reflection will enable the superintendent to understand his or her leadership style and power bases from which they operate allowing them "to adjust their behavior in varying situations" (Rice, Bishop, & Acker-Hocevar, 1997, p. 9). A superintendent must be able to empower his or her organization personnel.

Kenneth Trump, President and CEO of National School Safety and Security Services, highlighted the role of an administrator-in-charge in the event of a crisis situation. Trump (2000) suggests that a superintendent, principal, or other administrator-in-charge should assume the following roles:

1. Assessing the situation, engaging appropriate crisis guidelines, and monitoring their implementation.

2. Serving as the liaison with public safety agency's incident commander once they arrive, and coordinating with key individuals and organizations in the broader school community.

3. Assigning duties as needed.

4. Reviewing and approving public information releases, if possible approving appropriate requests for additional resources

5. Approving appropriate requests for additional resources. (p. 116)

These roles may vary depending on the circumstances of a particular crisis situation. According to Trump (2000) an administrator should:
...work diligently and methodically to strengthen security and crisis preparedness measures while still respecting and supporting the need for prevention, intervention, and other climate-related programs... demonstrating that with proper leadership, state and local officials can marshal resources and work collaboratively in the best interests of improving all components of a comprehensive safe schools plan” (p. 138).

Curriculum

The decision-making practices of the superintendent, school board, principal, and teachers have changed dramatically over the past few years. There has been a shift to a more collaborative model that clearly impacts the decision-making practices of the superintendent. There is an expectation that the superintendent keeps lines of communication open between school personnel and wider community.

Curriculum is the guide and/or map that provides administrators and teachers with objectives to be met within a content area of a study. Curriculum has been defined as:

All of the experiences that individual learners have in a program of education whose purpose is to achieve broad goals and related specific objectives, which is planned in terms of a framework of theory and research or past and present professional practice. (Pazkay & Hass, 2000, p. 3)

According to Andero (2000):

Curriculum policy continues to be a hot issue in the news throughout the United States. The responsibility of providing a suitable curriculum to meet the needs of
all children involves many people. Decisions are not often based on careful
analysis of content in the disciplines and on societal needs, or on studies of the
learning process and concerns of learners. Curriculum development is a
knowledge that has been selected by some individual or group and implies a
particular vision of what society should be like. The role of the Superintendent is
very important in curriculum policy. Another important aspect in curriculum
policy is how the Superintendent can develop and implement a curriculum policy
that can meet the needs of all students and produce a citizen who is successful and
productive in life. (p. 2)

This increased demand of federal and state legislators, special interest groups and
parents has placed a great deal of pressure on districts to achieve certain standards. This
pressure has weakened the power of the superintendent because now board members are
looking to experts in the law to determine how federal and state directives will impact a
district. As a result, much of the new curriculum policies tends to “reflect the ideas and
beliefs of individuals or of powerful and outspoken groups rather than the needs of the
students or society as a whole” (Andreo, 2000, p. 2).

Dusenbury and Weissberg (1998) indicated that school violence prevention
curricula must incorporate some if not all of the following to be successful:
1. Appropriate content based on strong theoretical or research foundation;
2. A comprehensive, multifaceted strategy with activities for families, schools, and
   communities;
3. Implementation and adequate follow-up;
4. Material that is relevant, culturally sensitive, and developmentally appropriate;
5. Interactive techniques appropriate for developing new skills;
6. Teacher training. (p.2)

McNeil (1996) breaks down the role of each person within the decision-making process for curriculum. The superintendent has a political role in dealing with the school board and working closely with the principal to implement curriculum. The superintendent influences curriculum policy by responding to matters before the board of education, initiating programs for staff development, making district personnel aware of changes occurring over schools, and moderating outside demands for change (Carter & Cunningham, 1997).

The principal is the most important person when it involves the adoption of curriculum at higher school. Because of decentralization of schools, the principal has been given greater responsibilities in the implementation of curriculum. A principal at a site-based managed school is going to be held accountable by the standards set forth by the state and federal government. Andero (2006) said: “It is vital that the principal surrounds him/herself with a faculty that will help him/her in implementing a curriculum that will meet the special needs of the local community and students while meeting the expectations from state and federal government mandates” (p. 5).

The local school boards have been given the power and responsibility from the state to make sure that their schools are being operated efficiently and by the law. If the local school board fails to comply with state or federal mandates, it may lose important funding that cannot be made up by taxation at the local level. According to Andero
(2006), "The court and the threat of lawsuit have put the final blow to the local school board as it relates to curriculum policy" (p. 5). This being said, superintendents must work together with the principals and school boards with a common purpose. Communication between these participants is essential. If these lines of communication breakdown, it will be very difficult to effectively implement curriculum change and policies.

Teachers’ Perceptions of Decision-making Practices of Superintendent

In the field of education, a supportive environment is critical to teacher satisfaction and commitment and willingness to support programs initiated by administrators. Because many teachers feel isolated from organizational support and resources, there is a feeling of frustration. This frustration leads to negative feelings and relationships with administrators and often a negative school climate. Brower and Balch (2005) suggest that “a leader must serve the institution objectively, collecting as much evidence as possible from as many sources as possible before making a decision” (p.37).

By doing their homework, administrators will develop a stronger rapport and more respect from their faculty. Greenfield (1995) said that an effective school has an administration whereas

... a condition wherein successful and appropriate teaching and learning are occurring for all students and teachers in the school; the morale of students, teachers, and other school members is positive; and parents, other community members, and the school district’s administration judge the school to be effectively fulfilling both the latter and the spirit of local, state, and federal laws and policies. (p. 61)
An administrator must know when to initiate, act, and lead, as well as know when to step back when decision-making. Greenfield (1995) believes that there are three distinct differences between leaders in the field of education and the so-called real world. The first one is that schools have a moral character. Secondly, a school is a workplace comprised of highly educated, independent thinkers who are working in an environment that is ever-changing, yet permanent. Permanent in that school will be around forever. Lastly, a school environment can be very unpredictable when it comes to the day to day events. Violence, discipline issues, absenteeism, assemblies, and fire drills are just a few examples of disruptions that may impact the learning environment (Greenfield, 1995).

The Rice, Bishop, and Acker-Hocevar study (1997) examines the perceptions of teachers regarding the work-related behaviors of Alabama’s elected and appointed local school superintendents. Their conclusions suggested that the effectiveness of a superintendent can be traced to how teachers and principals in a school district perceive their leadership. Their leadership style and how they utilize power will influence how they are perceived. Many times if a superintendent has an autocratic style of leadership, then fear will rule out. However, this style of leadership is not considered the most effective way to lead (McGriff et al., 1997). In particular, teachers’ perceptions of support from principals have been found to be an important component of organizational support.

According to Yoon (2003):

A major premise of the literature is that administrators should be sensitive to the needs of teachers and should be knowledgeable as to how to assist teacher. This presents tremendous challenges to the administrators because this requires a more
systematic approach in identifying the needs of teachers and delivering the appropriate support within the specific organizational perspective. Although this approach may be a challenging task for many administrators, it appears to be an important task worthy of further discussion. Empirical evidence suggests that teachers’ attitudes and responses to support services do vary.

Kowalski’s (1995) study on 17 superintendents from various parts of the United States revealed that there are several factors that affect the decision-making practices of a superintendent. The first factor was money and the last personal survival.

Kowalski’s (1995) top 10 factors affecting the decision-making of a superintendent are as follows:

1. Fiscal resources
2. Personal beliefs
3. Educational research
4. Input from administrative staff
5. Community socioeconomic conditions
6. School board member positions/opinions
7. Input from teachers
8. Community politics
9. Teacher union positions/pressure
10. Concerns for personal survival
Input from teachers was ranked number seven. Because teachers' suggestions are not a top priority factoring into the decision-making practices of a superintendent, teachers are compelled to believe that their opinion is not important.

The Use of Scientific-Based Research

The use of scientific-based research for school violence prevention is one of the major components of the NCLB (2001) Act. In the past, most programs that have been endorsed and funded by the federal and state governments had little if any data at all to show the programs' potential effectiveness. According to Juvonen (2001), “Only a handful of violence prevention approaches have been evaluated, and even fewer have been deemed to be effective or even promising” (p. 1). Proper evaluation research is costly and typically deemed a luxury by funders and program developers. However, funders will not support programs unless there is some data showing improvement and promise for the future (Flannery, 1998). Superintendents are feeling the pressure to select and implement scientific-based research programs for school violence prevention.

The U.S. Department of Education's Planning and Evaluation Service (2002) report titled Wide Scope, Questionable Quality cites that:

Although schools generally consulted a number of sources in selecting their activities, they typically placed a lower priority on research-based solutions. On average, schools used two resources to select a given prevention activity. The resources most often used to select a prevention activity were other program providers (57% of activities) and meetings within the school district (51% of the activities). Research-based information was among the least frequently used...
sources for activity selection. Formal outcome evaluations and publications summarizing research were used in the selection of 28 percent and 38 percent of activities, respectively. Perhaps as a result of the limited use of research-based information, only one-third of the prevention activities used methods or approaches found to be effective in the research literature. (Crosse et al., 2002, p.7)

When applying scientific-based research for school violence prevention, schools can better recognize early warning signs that can lead to violence and provide appropriate types of support to prevent potential crisis (Vermeire, 2002).

The Use of Evaluation Criteria

Developing the criteria to change popular opinion and government policy to address school violence is going be a long and difficult process because administrators will be required to show evidence that prevention programs are working and will need time to do so (Sugai, Sprague, Horner, & Walker, 2000). In order to improve the overall quality of prevention programs, districts must focus their efforts on “needs assessment, planning, increased use of research-based approaches, and monitoring of implementation” (Crosse et al., 2002, p.1). The first logical step to any violence prevention program is to collect as much data as possible. Data collection is accomplished by using three strategies. First, a qualitative strategy is used to identify problems and subproblems in order to determine what goals are hoped to be accomplished. Second is to compare a group that has been exposed to an intervention with a group that has not been exposed. Lastly, the third technique, which works best in a
large-scale setting, is to randomly assign students to treatment groups (Flannery, 1998). Data collection is vital to be able to evaluate any school violence prevention program.

Whenever a crisis occurs, the first questions asked are “Why did this happen?” and “How could this have been prevented?” The superintendent must be able address these questions. It will be his or her response to these questions and the districts overall preparedness for crisis situations that will be scrutinized by the media, faculty, and community. The superintendent must be able to communicate to the public that the decisions made in the past to prevent school violence and crisis situations were thorough, supported by research, and monitored using an evaluation criteria.

Summary

The research presented in this chapter suggests that school violence is a major concern in our world today. The causes vary from school to school but share a common trend that fear exists in almost all schools. The response of the school organization, led by the superintendent is essential to creating a safe and secure learning environment. The research in this chapter suggests that curriculum is the guide that enables a district to manage and mitigate the problem of school violence. Prevention programs that are scientific based are more likely to be effective when properly implemented and evaluated. Given the interpretation of the research, teachers perceive the decision-making practices of superintendents for school violence prevention curriculum to be unclear. Chapter 3 provides the methodology of this study.
Chapter III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was two-fold. The first purpose of this study was to investigate the decision-making practices of three superintendents in northern New Jersey in selecting school violence prevention programs to determine if programs were data driven and research based. The second purpose of this study was to investigate how teachers perceived their input on the decision-making practices of their superintendents in the selection of school violence prevention programs.

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the methodology for this study. This chapter is divided into the following sections: (a) overview, (b) research sample, (c) research design, (d) techniques for data collection and analysis, (e) development of interview instrument and interview questions, (f) focus group questions, (g) treatment of data and (h) summary.

Overview

Since Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), there has been much emphasis on scientific-based research. The majority of studies suggest that there is not enough scientific-based material on school violence prevention programs (Dusenbury & Weissberg, 1998). The NCLB Act has placed emphasis on writing curriculum that utilizes scientific-based data to guide their decision-making for the selection and implementation of school violence prevention programs. As a result, the federal government and public are placing pressure on districts to comply with the standards set forth in NCLB.
Research Sample

Three superintendents were selected for these interviews. According to Johnson (1996) the superintendent is "...a champion of reform, assessing a district's needs, devising solutions to its problems, taking charge of its policies and practices, providing support to its principles intent on improving their schools, inspiring confidence among teachers and ensuring compliance by the reluctant and recalcitrant" (p. xi). This being said, the researcher believed that superintendents would best serve the interests of the research questions. Therefore, questions were composed after reviewing numerous curriculums and school violence prevention programs. Three focus groups of teachers were formed because of their in-depth understanding of the classroom and of the ever-changing school environment.

Research Design

This study was designed to qualitatively assess the decision-making practice of superintendents on curricula for school violence prevention. Patton (1990) states, "Qualitative methods permit the evaluator to study selected issues in depth and detail. Approaching fieldwork without being constrained by predetermined categories of analysis contributes to the depth, openness, and detail of qualitative inquiry" (p. 13). In keeping with qualitative nature, face-to-face interviews with superintendents were administered and assessed. Data were collected and analyzed to understand how superintendents made decisions to prevent school violence. Three focus groups of teachers were formed to provide a better understanding of teachers’ perceptions and their relationship to how superintendents go about making decisions and what trends and patterns may be connected.
The interviewer utilized a standardized open-ended interview with identical questions for each responder. By doing so, this limited the amount of variation between responses of superintendents and provided the evaluator with more comprehensive data. These data were analyzed to see common trends, themes, and concerns of a superintendent as it factors into curriculum for school violence prevention programs. The interviewer did not restrict the responses of the superintendents but rather allowed them to speak freely on what measures had been taken in terms of curriculum for school violence prevention. Patton (1990) suggests that the qualitative mode equips the researcher with a format that allows him or her to find out what people know, think, and feel through their experiences and perceptions. It also allows the researchers to analyze written documents. The open-ended questions allowed the interviewer to engage the people being interviewed so that current school violence prevention programs could be better evaluated before being adopted. This style of questioning permitted the interviewees freedom to utilize any type of language they wanted in their responses (Patton, 1990).

The researcher mailed a letter of solicitation to 30 randomly selected superintendents in northern New Jersey explaining the purpose of the study and identifying the university that the researcher is associated with. Each envelope contained a stamped, self-addressed return envelope. The first three superintendents to respond to the letters of solicitation would be utilized for this study. The letter indicated that no superintendent would be identified and that his or her privacy would not be violated. Once the three superintendents were selected and committed to volunteering in the study, a follow-up phone call and letter was sent out confirming the conversation and informing
each superintendent of the details and process involved in conducting the study.

Interviews were then set up on a convenient basis for the researcher and superintendent. A form requesting permission for the use and release of anonymous taped responses was to be signed by all participants. This permission form also indicated that once the researcher completed the study, all audiotapes would then be destroyed.

Techniques for Data Collection and Analysis

The researcher composed 10 open-ended questions that provided in-depth responses from the superintendents in what they know, what they think, how they feel, what they have done and what they believe the results have been as a result of their decisions. Patton (1990) noted that:

The purpose of open-ended interviewing is not to put things in someone’s mind (for example, the interviewer’s preconceived categories for organizing the world) but rather to access the perspective of the person being interviewed. We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe. (p. 196)

The raw data of interviews are the responses from the three superintendents who are directly quoted.

Research completed by Flannery (1998) was utilized to measure a superintendent’s response to four particular areas of evaluation:

1. Needs assessment: is a formative evaluation in which a district steps back and focuses on the issues to decide a strategy to prevent and reduce school violence. (p. 2)

2. Outcome evaluation: this focuses on the results because of the intervention. Questions are asked in order to comprehend ways in which the program was
or was not effective. By doing so, districts will be able to decide what limitations lie within the program. (p. 3)

3. Monitoring evaluation: This is ongoing as a district continues to reflect and asks questions in regards to the violence prevention program. Teachers, parents, and the community are the catalysts that will make a program work because without their support, even a research-based program that has been proven effective is doomed to fail. (p. 4)

4. Cost-benefit analysis: Is the program worth investing in? This question is answered in the results, which will vary from program to program. If a program is adopted to reduce vandalism and the costs to repair items that have been damaged or destroyed, then a district will do a cost analysis of year-to-year vandalism to see if the program is working reducing expenses. (p. 4)

In order to not compromise the consistency of the interviews, the questions asked of the superintendents were done in a similar format, utilizing the same tone, facial expressions, and straightforwardness (Patton, 1990).

The three focus groups were formed to listen and gather information from the discussion of teachers. “A focus group study is a carefully planned series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment” (Krueger & Casey, 2000, p. 5) The focus group discussions provided important information. This information was analyzed to see how the perceptions of teachers provided clues and insights into what they believe and how it affects the decision-making practices of superintendents on curricula for school violence prevention. Teachers were selected because their daily interaction and contact with
students in the classroom and hallways. In addition, teachers of any school district are accustomed to making decisions.

Development of Interview Instrument and Interview Questions

The interview questions were open-ended which lent to discussion by the participants. The questions were derived from research on school violence prevention curriculum and on the role of the school organization. In addition, a jury of experts' validation was utilized for the interview and focus group questions. The jury confirmed that the questions were valid and relevant within the framework of the study.

By keeping the sample size small, it allowed for in-depth analysis of the responses of the superintendents. Qualitative data (Patton, 1990) "typically produces a wealth of detailed information about a much smaller number of people and cases. This increases understanding of the cases and situations but reduces generalizations" (p.14). This number was also kept small because of the nature of the study in that finding time to meet with superintendents can be very difficult because of their busy schedules.

The subjects for this study were superintendents of three different school districts in northern New Jersey. Each district is comprised of Grades K-12. The total number of subjects in this study was three. The purpose of the interviews was to assess, according to the interviewees' responses, the decision-making practices of superintendents on curriculum for school violence prevention. The superintendents' responses provided a rich database for comparison of what their decision-making practices are and what evaluative criterion is used and how they believed teachers perceived their decision-making for school violence prevention.
Interview Questions

Superintendent Background

1. What is the enrollment of your district?

2. How long have you been in your current position and how did you go about becoming a superintendent?

Needs Assessment

3. How would you describe the impact school violence has had on your district? To what extent have incidences such as Columbine, the terrorist attack in Russia, the shooting in Minnesota and 9/11 impacted your role as superintendent?

4. Obviously a high school will have different safety issues than a middle school or elementary school, therefore, school violence prevention programs cannot always be applied to all three levels. To what extent do you believe school violence has impacted upon your students at the different levels?

5. What is the superintendent’s responsibility in regard to selecting and implementing curriculum for school violence prevention?

6. How do you make decisions when having the final say in selecting a school violence prevention program?

Outcome Evaluation

7. Once a program is in place, how do you evaluate whether or not your school violence prevention program is effective?

8. How many of your programs are research based and how many of your programs are not research based? What programs are more effective? How do you know?
Process Evaluation

9. As a school district, what steps have been taken to ensure safety and security for your faculty, staff, and students in the event of a crisis situation?

10. How much input do teachers have on your decision-making practices when selecting and implementing curricula for school violence prevention?

Cost-Benefit Analysis

11. Are your current school violence prevention programs cost effective?

12. Are there any other additional comments and concerns in regard to a superintendent’s decision-making practices for curriculum for school violence prevention? In addition, is there any advice you would give to a new superintendent in regards to selecting and implementing curriculum for school violence prevention?

Focus Group Questions

Focus groups were formed to assist in trying to understand the differences in perspectives between superintendents and teachers as they relate to decision-making practices for school violence prevention programs. According to Krueger and Casey (2000), many times top management people lose sight of the frontline people and as a result make poor decisions.

Krueger and Casey (2000) articulate “a focus group study is a carefully planned series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment. Each group is conducted with six to eight people by a skilled interviewer” (p. 5). This type of setting allows each participant the
opportunity to share ideas and perceptions as well as respond to one another's ideas and perceptions.

The basis for the following questions was taken from Krueger's (1998) _Developing Questions for Focus Groups_. The focus groups were formed to understand the perceptions of teachers as they relate to a superintendent's decision-making practices for school violence prevention programs.

1. We are here today to talk about school violence and the decision-making practices of your superintendent/administrators on curriculum for school violence prevention programs. Let's start by making a list of three things that you really like about your school. Now let's make another list indicating three things that you believe indicate some level of school violence in your school. Take a few minutes to do this...

2. Tell me about an example of violence you've witnessed or experienced in your school.

3. What causes violence?
   - Listen for:
     a. Bullying
     b. Being Abused in the past
     c. Drugs
     d. Alcohol

4. What measure has your district as a whole taken to improve student relationships and to prevent future school violence?

5. How are your school's violent prevention programs being evaluated?
6. How much say do teachers have in creating, adopting and evaluating current programs?

7. What evidence exists that your current curriculum for school violence prevention programs in your district is research based?

8. What is your understanding of the decision-making practices of the superintendent for school violence prevention programs in your district?

Let me summarize the key points. Is this summary adequate? Is there anything I missed?

Treatment of Data

The interview questions provided the researcher with important feedback on how superintendents had made decisions in the past for school violence prevention. With the initial responses, the researcher began to see some commonalities and trends in the decision-making practices of superintendents. Patton (1990) states that the “...overlapping of data collection and analysis improves both the quality of data collected and the quality of the analysis so long as the evaluator is careful not to allow these initial interpretations to distort additional data collection” (p. 377). Transcripts of the tape-recorded interviews provided the data for this study. Each interviewee was assigned a code ensuring an accurate record could be maintained and anonymity would be guaranteed as well. Initial responses led the researcher to formulate categories as analysis ensued. These categories were based on the frequency and recurring themes in the responses of how superintendents made decisions in selecting school violence prevention programs.
Summary

In this chapter, the research sample, research design, techniques for data collection and analysis, rationale behind the development of the interview instrument, interview questions, and focus group questions were presented. Chapter 4 of this study provides a presentation and summary of these findings.
CHAPTER IV
PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA

The purpose of this study was two-fold. The first purpose of this study was to investigate the decision-making practices of three superintendents in northern New Jersey in selecting school violence prevention programs to determine if programs were data driven and research based. The second purpose of this study was to investigate how teachers perceived their input on the decision-making practices of their superintendents in the selection of school violence prevention programs.

The purpose of this chapter is to present the research findings and to provide a summary of those findings relative to the study of objectives. The data collected in this chapter were from superintendent interviews and focus group discussions of teachers. This chapter is divided into the following sections: (a) nature of the study, (b) presentation of data, (c) summary of findings, and (d) summary.

Nature of the Study

Since Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), there has been much emphasis on scientific-based research. The majority of studies suggest that there is not enough scientific-based research on school violence prevention programs (Dusenbury & Weissberg, 1998). The NCLB Act has placed emphasis on writing curriculum that utilizes scientific-based data to guide their decision-making for the selection and implementation of school violence prevention programs. As a result, the federal government and public are placing pressure on districts to comply with the standards set forth in NCLB.
This qualitative study employed two research methodologies: interviews and focus groups, to answer the research questions. The researcher felt by employing two distinct methodologies utilizing decision-makers for the district and in the classroom, the study would be strengthened. According to Bogdan and Biklen (2003) “Multiple sources lead to a fuller understanding of the phenomena” (p. 107).

The major purpose of the research was to qualitatively assess the decision-making practices of superintendents for school violence prevention programs and to determine whether or not research-based programs had been adopted, implemented, and evaluated. In addition, teachers who volunteered to participate in focus group discussions were utilized to find out (a) how much input teachers had in developing curriculum for school violence prevention, and/or (b) how much input teachers had in choosing existing research-based prevention programs.

In this study, three major research questions were addressed:

1. How do superintendents utilize data from within their district to select and implement curricula for school violence prevention?

2. How do superintendents evaluate a school violence prevention program that is research based and or a school violence prevention program that is not researched based?

3. How do teachers perceive their input on the decision-making practices of a superintendent on curricula for school violence prevention?

The researcher interviewed three superintendents of school districts that contained kindergarten to twelfth grades. The districts varied in terms of District Factor Grouping (DPG). District Factor Grouping was set up by the State of New Jersey to identify
districts according to their socio economic needs. In this study, the participants were mainly from suburban districts, and they were labeled as GH, DE and I. Interviewees were asked a series of questions covering four related areas involving a superintendent's decision-making practices for school violence prevention programs. The four areas were: (1) needs assessment, (2) outcome evaluation, (3) process evaluation, and (4) cost-benefit analysis. All four areas addressed research questions one and two. The third research question was addressed through three focus group discussions with teachers.

Presentation of the Data

Interviews and focus group discussion were conducted in various locations. Two superintendents interviews were held in the superintendents’ offices while one interview was conducted in a boardroom. The focus groups discussions were held in one of three areas: central office boardroom, faculty room, and a high school classroom.

Interview Questions:

Superintendent Background

1. What is the enrollment of your district?

2. How long have you been in your current position and how did you go about becoming a superintendent?

Needs Assessment

3. How would you describe the impact school violence has had on your district? To what extent have incidences such as Columbine, the terrorist attack in Russia, the shooting in Minnesota, and 9/11 impacted your role as superintendent?

4. Obviously a high school will have different safety issues than a middle school or elementary school, therefore, school violence prevention programs cannot always
be applied to all three levels. To what extent do you believe school violence has impacted upon your students at the different levels?

5. What is the superintendent’s responsibility in regard to selecting and implementing curriculum for school violence prevention?

6. How do you make decisions when having the final say in selecting a school violence prevention program?

Outcome Evaluation

7. Once a program is in place, how do you evaluate whether or not your school violence prevention program is effective?

8. How many of your programs are research based and how many of your programs are not research based? What programs are more effective? How do you know?

Process Evaluation

9. As a school district, what steps have been taken to ensure safety and security for your faculty, staff, and students in the event of a crisis situation?

10. How much input do teachers have on your decision-making practices when selecting and implementing curricula for school violence prevention?

Cost-Benefit Analysis

11. Are your current school violence prevention programs cost effective?

12. Are there any other additional comments and concerns in regard to a superintendent’s decision-making practices for curriculum for school violence prevention? In addition, is there any advice you would give to a new superintendent in regards to selecting and implementing curriculum for school violence prevention?
Combined Subject Responses to Each Question

Superintendent/District Background

Question #1. What is the enrollment of your district?

Response #1A. Approximately 3400 students.

Response #1B. It’s 4500 students.

Response #1C. We’re just a shade over 2700.

Question #2. How long have you been in your current position, and how did you go about becoming a superintendent?

Response #2A. N/A

Response #2B. N/A

Response #2C. N/A

Needs Assessment

Question #3. How would you describe the impact school violence has had on your district? To what extent have incidences such as Columbine, the terrorist attack in Russia, the shooting in Minnesota and 9/11 impacted your role as superintendent?

Response #3A. One thing, it’s kept me up a lot later at night. Of course we take incidents much more seriously than we would have previously. With Columbine, now any time a student threatens another student or a student brings a weapon into school, or there’s any unusual pattern such as that, a lot of our discretion in dealing with that has been taken away. We have no choice but to take those things as a serious threat, unless we can confirm otherwise. Even things, remotely, like terrorism, wherever it is, affects us now. Before it was something that we’d
read about and talk about in current events. Now, it’s something that we have to take very seriously and consider how such an attack might help (us think) how we would respond, should it occur, and how we can prevent it and provide security for our people. It has certainly raised everyone’s level of awareness and attention to these kinds of issues.

Response # 3B. Out of those four incidences, I would probably say that Columbine and 9/11 have had the greatest impact on me and probably on my district, especially 9/11. The impact would be that it was fairly easy to get into our school preceding those incidents. As a result, we applied for a state grant, which we received, that allowed us to do certain counseling. I believe it was six parents that were lost as a result of 9/11. Part of the grant was grief counseling, counseling for the families themselves. We also put in for security. We wanted to add cameras and buzzer bells and each one of our K-8 schools. The only school that had some beginning of a security system was the high school. As a result of 9/11, we installed security systems to each of our K-8 schools. There is a camera and a buzzer when you enter that did not exist before 9/11. Every visitor must sign in. We used to ask people to sign in, but I believe we are much more vigilant in signing in. I hope today when you came, you were greeted at a window, you were asked to sign in and then you came down here. We instituted faculty identification badges at the middle school and high school levels. For some of us, it also is a key to get in, but it is a way to identify that we work here. Students now, are supposed to be carrying/wearing ID badges, which started this year. It’s not going particularly well, there is a lot of resistance on the part of
students. That was an idea that came from the high school administration, it was no incident that caused it, and I’m not sure, long term, what the high school administration will be doing. So, the other thing in central office, as a result of 9/11, we didn’t even have a TV, we installed a TV, we were totally cut off from the world. I don’t even know if we had a radio down here. So, even knowing what was going on was very difficult. So, we made short lease to central office that we had a TV installed so that if we had to watch a program, aside from watching tapes, that it made sense that we had some kind of television contact.

The terrorist attack on Russia had no impact. It was terrible. The shooting in Minnesota had no real impact. What we did do is we had one of the sheriffs after Columbine and after some of the other incidents that happened nationally, come in to do a workshop for the administrators. He gave the administrators a sense of the profile of the youngsters that were involved in these acts of violence. They tended to be White males that were in the age range of middle school age. At least the administrative group recognized the group of youngsters that were involved in these heinous acts.

Response # 3C. I think it’s had a tremendously significant impact. Just as a way of example: I think as a result of that time (9/11), and not just our district, but you would probably find that throughout the country, that there is now much more attention on crisis response. We developed in the last several years, probably since 9/11, a formal school response team at each of our schools. We practice in our schools, what we call Intruder Alert Drill, where the kids act like it is a fire drill. The kids practice as if we have an intruder. They go to a certain location of
the room, and the door gets closed and things like that. Uh, we now have in our schools formal evacuation plans that have been coordinated with, ------ Police Department. If our schools are ever evacuated for a variety of reasons, including things such as a terrorist attack, then we have a certain route, which, you know, where our kids would be housed during that time frame. We now have calling chains for parents about where to retrieve their children should something occur. We have, with our administrators here, you know, those Nextel two-way calling, as a back up communication system in case our telephone systems were inoperable or we had to move kids out for some reason. I think we’re all much more sensitive to the fact that anything can happen. In many ways there has been a loss of innocence.

There has been a lot more staff training, with regard to, you know, all these various issues of school response: What to do if this occurs, and what to do if that occurs. We developed a little Response Clip Board, which we use. It was developed for administrators so that when a crisis occurs, sometimes it is very difficult to think on your feet with so many things going on, you have something to turn to which will provide an administrator with the necessary steps to take to deal with the crisis situation. We developed this because what I didn’t want, was, our administrators trying to find more policies and things, so I just tried to put things in a very simplistic place, so you can just flip to it, if this happens, you know, this is what I want you to do. So that the idea is that we’re going to have a unified response, so people know what to do, when to do it, for the right occasion. So, uh, yeah, I think your question is well focused that I do think that, you know,
things are much different today than they have been years ago. (This is really impressive. It makes it easy that whenever you have to respond to anything, it is as simple as turning to the Crisis Response clipboard.)

Question # 4. Obviously a high school will have different safety issues than a middle school or elementary school, therefore, school violence prevention programs cannot always be applied to all three levels. To what extent do you believe school violence has impacted upon your students at the different levels?

Response # 4A. Obviously, you would deal with it at different levels, yet there are some things they have in common. Again, if a student, even at the elementary level, when you have a student making a threat, 'I'm going to kill you,' you still it take it more seriously now. Not as serious as if a high school kid would do that, but you still take it seriously, same thing with a middle school or a high school student. So, it's impacted kids because they have lost a little bit of the ability to be human. In that, if they lose their temper and say, 'I'm going to kill you,' they have done something that potentially has serious consequences. Generations ago, that would be just, 'All right, calm down,' and deal with it as not such a serious issue. Just as we have been impacted as school administrators by taking things seriously, it weighs on kids to. Now, they know that whatever they say and do will be taken seriously.

Response # 4B. At the elementary level, we have had a long history of the program called Quest Skills for Adolescents, Skills for Growing, that is a program that tries to help build good and strong self-esteem. It's not a violence prevention program, but it is, um, if you have a good self-esteem, a good character and self-
Esteem, you’re less likely to commit acts of violence and/or bullying, and/or use drugs, and/or alcohol. So, we’ve had a long history of implementing Quest from elementary through middle school. The middle school level, the last couple of years, we instituted a girl anti-bullying program based upon the work of Rachel Simmons who wrote and researched girl bullying which is different than boy bullying. She’s the author of Odd Girl Out. Both schools have programs in place to address girl bullying. In fact, ------- Middle School was recognized by, I believe, the State, as a model program that has been sharing its program with other middle schools throughout the state. At the high school level, there’s no specific program that is in place. What we had attempted to do is encourage youngsters to get involved in high school and co-curricular and extra-curricular activities. We have child study team members that are well trained, guidance counselors that look for a disconnect in a youngster’s abilities to function socially with their peers and attempt to intervene with them on an individual basis.

Response #4C: That is, again, a kind of an interesting question, because if you look every so often, you see in newspapers where schools have applied zero tolerance policies. We have tried to differentiate some level of reasonableness in a child’s development in terms of what we think is appropriate and inappropriate when it involves a threat. Yes, threats at all levels should be taken seriously, but at the high school level, we may look at a threat more seriously when a student says, “I’ll kill you,” than if a second grade student said the same thing.
Question # 5. What is the superintendent’s responsibility in regard to selecting and implementing curriculum for school violence prevention?

Response # 5A. Well, obviously it’s the superintendent’s responsibility to make any recommendations, final recommendations for programs, to the board of education. So, we’re responsible for making sure that they’re being implemented. However, I still think that principals are the forefront of this and they need to be the ones who have the most input into the decisions. Assuming, of course, they involve their staff in those decisions. People in the school know better what’s appropriate for their students, than a superintendent sitting in central office someplace. So, it’s my responsibility to recommend it, but it’s also my responsibility to make sure that the decision-making in the lower levels is sound and I push them through questioning and things like that, but I do rely heavily on building level administration to make those recommendations.

Response # 5B. I think the superintendent’s role is a support role. I’m not involved in initiating. If I were to see a good program or learn about a good program or practice in another school, I would bring that to the administration here and share what it is that they are doing. The programs that are in place have emerged through faculty, through principals, and not through my direct initiations. They may have arisen from other supervisors and administrators, but not myself.

Response # 5C. Well, certainly, I think that the superintendent is always responsible for the entire area of programs that a district implements. In addition to my overseeing programs, the board approves curriculums, including our school violence prevention programs. It’s usually something I present to the board, so
that I'm responsible for assuring its implementation at the various grade levels is being done properly. Uh, I provide the evaluation of the programs and try to keep, you know, statistics, in terms of what we perceive how it is impacting students.

Question #6. How do you make decisions when having the final say in selecting a school violence prevention program?

Response #6A. I sit down with the building level administration and ask questions. I ask what are their decisions, what alternatives they consider and why is the recommendation the one that it is?

Response #6B. I would look at, what are the objectives, what are we trying to accomplish, what's involved in the program, and I would want to know where it is successfully being implemented? What is the history in other districts? What is involved in terms of training costs, etc., how much time it takes, time also is a factor, and how are we going to measure the effectiveness of the program or how do we know it's working?

Response #6C. Well, the way our structure works is I have an assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction. Basically, I delegate to him the responsibility of developing a 5-year curriculum plan for the district.

I don't view a school violence prevention program really very differently than any other program, and I think what I mean by that is curriculum always needs to be viewed as dynamic and not static, because the landscaping environment changes. You want programs to be relevant and just as your question earlier about, you know, the 9/11 tragedy, when your environment changes and schools are open systems, your school has to be responsive to those changes. We
try to be proactive in terms of looking at curriculum programs and by doing so we have programs in different stages. One is the formative stage, two is the implementation stage, and three is evaluation stage. We look at artifacts of data, to see what exists and then compare that to what ought to be. What we try to do with the 'ought to be' section is certainly, look at the research, go out into the field, and see what other schools are doing and the discrepancy between where you are and where you want to be. In terms of curriculum, I try to think of where I want us to be. (Okay, so it's like a cycle?) Yeah, and to me, I think that's what curriculum should always be. It should never be static.

Outcome Evaluation

Question #7. Once a program is in place, how do you evaluate whether or not your school violence prevention program is effective?

Response #7A. (I'm sure that's probably done by the building principal, as well.) No, I do it as well. I do look globally at the district. Something that's kind of new for schools, interestingly, is using data to make those decisions. We do look at the annual violence and vandalism report and look for patterns. Additionally, now we are using a software program, E-Scholar that tracks any kind of data that you have. For instance, we found that November and February were the months that had the highest incidents of discipline problems at the middle school and high school levels. We don't know why, but we know that. So, using data to analyze the data, I think is really absolutely critical. So we are beginning to really use data in purposeful ways to try to make sense out of the patterns. Just to follow up on that, at the high school level, if next year we see, wow, the ninth grade really
had high incidents of violence or other types of disciplinary incidents, I would
look back at eighth grade, in middle school, and say, ‘What was going on with
those kids?’ and I could track them backwards. Generally, by the time the
incident occurs, a violent incident, at least, we’re too late. We want to look at
what are the factors leading up to the outbreak of violence and try to intervene at
that point. We kind of missed the boat if it already happened. Now,
understanding that sometimes violence is unpreventable, it’s unpredictable and
random, so, you can’t do it all, but if they can do a better job of predicting when
it’s coming and intervene.

Response # 7B. That’s tough because you can’t just say that because you have a
program in place that you don’t have violence or vandalism or bullying, etc. If
you’re able to collect, I guess, some baseline data that could be one of the
indicators. But, very often, I don’t believe that we do that and the population of
students would be different students that you’re measuring because they’re always
changing. So, this is an area that’s pretty difficult to measure. I guess you can
look at suspensions. Some of the incidents are much more subtle, like girl
bullying. Girl bullying doesn’t result like boy bullying does, usually in a fight.
It’s incidents of ignoring people, you know, shunning them, starting rumors about
them, ruining their reputation, not allowing somebody to sit with you. So, unless
it’s reported to you, you would have no way of knowing. We have not had a
major incidence of violence in the schools or in the school community involving
the students, yet I still feel compelled to try to have some programs that alert
students. We do a lot during October, which is Violence Prevention Month, if
you will. We report incidences of school violence to the public and of course to the State Department of Education at the October board meeting.

Response #7C. One example I could think of is a few years back; the state inactivated a mandate about bullying, which to me is a school prevention type of curriculum. What we tried to do is to create a kind of report form at that time to capture the number of incidences of bullying. We charted when they happened and where they happened whether they were in stairwells at schools, inside classrooms, in the hallways, outside in the playgrounds, and so forth. We just tried to develop a baseline. We also used school surveys to find out some of the perceptions of parents of their son/daughter’s school. And, some of the questions we asked were how safe they feel their child is at our school. So I think those kinds of things assist us well. Uh, and you also try to look at your patterns of discipline, in terms of, are there specific issues that are happening with your population of kids on a recurring basis? And then, try to investigate the cause or reasons whereas programs maybe developed to assist in combating the problem.

Question # 8. How many of your programs are research based and how many of your programs are not research based? What programs are more effective? How do you know?

Response # 8A. I’d say probably it’s around 50/50. The only reason I could say that is because a lot of the programs that we do in terms of bullying and those types of programs, are funded through the Character Education Grant, and they require you to choose one of the research-based programs. So, it’s probably about a mixture of 50/50 on that, and I honestly couldn’t tell you, at this point, which
ones are more effective. They don’t give me enough data yet to make that determination.

Response # 38. Well, the two that I know that are researched based are the Quest Skills for Growing Program, and that was endorsed by many of the major organizations, including Lions Quest. The Girl Bullying program is really our own program, but it is based upon the research of Rachel Simmons. So, you know, we developed the program, it’s not a canned or packaged program. It’s trying to make girls aware of behaviors and help give them strategies, which counteract the girl bullying. It’s not a canned program, that one we developed ourselves.

Response # 8C. I’m assuming that you’re talking about the school violence programs (Yes, correct.) I guess the ones that do have research in it, but not very positive research, is our DARE program. Some of the research studies on DARE, because it’s a national program, have basically indicated that if anything, it may impact, the impetus for more kids getting involved in alcohol, drug behavior, as a result of being exposed, you know, through education. So, yes, it’s research based, the research doesn’t seem to show it as a very effective program.

We have in the younger grades, Here’s Looking at 2000. It is drug prevention, violence prevention, and that does have a research base. The Character Ed program, which is our more anti-bullying program, includes a program called Lion’s Quest. It also has a research base. To the question about, how do we know that programs are effective: Well I feel that through peer
mediation and my dialogue with my middle school principals tells me what programs seem to work for kids.

Process Evaluation

Question # 9. As a school district, what steps have been taken to ensure safety and security for your faculty, staff, and students in the event of a crisis situation?

Response # 9A. Of course, like all districts, we have a Crisis Intervention Manual. We do look at it, at least annually, to make sure it’s updated. Recently, we sat down with our school resource officer and went through the whole plan using the checklist. The state required doing one through the entire district and one through the issues, in terms of security, where the gaps are and what needs to be done. He also conducts tests with the building principals, you know, Code Blue tests, and he’ll observe it and give recommendations to them. We’ve asked him to try and break into the school, so we know where the gaps are. So, we really utilize the local police department, their resource is a great deal and their expertise in that. So, it’s a matter of a policy, it’s a matter of a manual, practice and review.

Response # 9B. I mentioned some of the things. I mentioned that we have better communication today than we did, including walkie-talkies for administrators. We also, in this district, have a plan that’s been worked out with the head of emergency management for each one of our schools. So, if there were to be some kind of a crisis, some kind of a major issue, we have a plan of where we would evacuate the students, if we could evacuate the students. We’ve had drills at the elementary level, at the high school level in which the plan involves corralling students to one of two areas, if that’s possible. Either indoors in the gymnasium
or outdoors to the football field bleachers. We also, for the K-8s make sure that we have some emergency supplies for each one of the buildings on an annual basis. Having a transistor radio, making sure that we have a supply of water, making sure that we have flashlights with batteries, things that we probably didn’t pay much attention to, we’ve begun to pay attention to those kinds of things. We do have an office of emergency management, so if we were to have any kind of emergency, even at a building level, a couple of years ago, we thought we had a dangerous chemical. All we do is call that office and then they take over. There has to be good communication between them and the school administration, the high school principal, principals, and myself, etc. So, that’s one of the things. We also have a booklet that gets disseminated to parents through the office of emergency management, outlining the plan of what to do in case of an emergency. I’m not sure most people are paying attention to that, nor would they know what to do. We also have a lockdown procedure, which we didn’t have prior to Columbine. In each one of our schools, there’s a code for a lock down drill. We’ve had drills where we block a stairway and make sure that kids can evacuate if there’s some obstruction. The police have practiced in our building when school has not been in session. There have been some practice sessions at the high school, in particular. We’ve done a couple of things, that before Columbine, we would not have thought about.

*Response # 9C*: We have set up a school crisis response team at each school that I have all their cell numbers and things. We use it up for a variety of reasons, including if we have a death of a parent or child. We work very closely with the -
police, as a matter of fact, last March I think it was, the chief of police and I went down to a conference down in Washington and the entire topic was on school responses, educator responses to crisis situations. It was kind of interesting. It was by the National Center for Exploited and Missing Children. They had these brilliant minds that have really looked at and investigated issues like bullying, Columbine, and so forth. They did a whole Power Point presentation of the number of incidences that have occurred nationwide. What I found fascinating was they did a profile of the type of kid that acts out. It seems like it’s the kid who’s the victim of being bullied. What seems to occur is that the kid that is being bullied over and over and over again that rather than taking his/her anger out on the bully, what the victim tends to do is take the anger out on the bystanders, like those that are his classmates that have watched and staff members that have watched this behavior by the bully, but have done nothing to prevent it. And, their theory is that the kid then says I’m going to pick on the bystander rather than the bully because the bully has demonstrated these reactionary things. He’s going to fight back, but these bystanders have not done anything. They’ve demonstrated their passiveness, so I’m going to act out against them; therefore, it’s likely they’re not going to do anything back to me. It was really interesting. But, it was a whole program on those types of things in which schools should try to work in sync with police department in terms of looking at what type of behaviors do these kids tend to have in your community. Because what happens in a student population in Los Angeles may be very different in
rural Pennsylvania, may be very different than what happens in New Jersey, that type of thing.

Question # 10. How much input do teachers have on your decision-making practices when selecting and implementing curricula for school violence prevention?

Response # 10A. A great deal. Of course, that is, assuming, they want that input. Sometimes, teachers are so filled with their own curriculum, whether it’s social studies, that they don’t often have the time. So, usually it’s the building level, whether it’s there at the high school, they have a cabinet, or at the middle school, it’s teaming. It comes up through the principals at the school level. We don’t have a district-wide violence prevention team or program that meet with teachers directly today.

Response # 10B. They would have major input, just like they do under curriculum. They’re the people that work with the kids. That’s why my role in selecting a program is pretty minimal.

Response # 10C. Our most recent school violence prevention program was that Lions Quest program, the Character Ed, which I believe is used in our Middle Schools. Most of the curriculum development that we do for material selection in the district is usually formulated through a committee of teachers and administrators. Normally, we send out a letter to the targeted faculty in terms of what disciplines it might be in and who we would like to come on board. We have our assistant curricular person, typically chairing. As I mentioned to you earlier, they start the process from the beginning of time to figure out where we are, in terms of problematically, and what’s going on with the current programs.
They've done that, and then they start eventually looking at materials that will fit whatever they developed in terms of what the program ought to be. So, they typically will have a lot of input in terms of the material selections and what takes place. I don't remember Lions Quest today. Typically our staff is fairly involved in program selection. Sometimes we run pilots of new sets of materials and things like that.

Cost-Benefit Analysis

Question #11. Are your current school violence prevention programs cost effective?

Response #11A. The only reason why I would say, yes it is, is because we have gotten grants for a lot of it. Character Education Grant, but our police department, also, applied on our behalf for a security grant for cameras, for exterior lights, for door entry systems. So, that helps to make it cost effective because the cost of it isn't borne by the board of education. But whether it's effective or not, I don't know.

Response #11B. From my perspective, they are. I mean this Quest Skills for Growing, we do our own in-house training, even though, technically speaking, they want you to send teachers out for multiple days. If we had followed, religiously, the guidelines, and did out of district training, it would have been cost prohibitive. Especially, in the past, you know, more than 5 years, about 50% of our faculty are new and we would have had to be sending people out for 4 days of training just for one program and that would, not only from a time point of view, would have been excessive. If you're a middle school teacher taking 4 days out for training, it would be too much, so there is some modified training that goes on
during the summer for Quest Skills for Growing. The other program, it involves mostly the administration and guidance counselors working with girls directly. So, it is not as teacher - based. (More one for one?) Well, small groups. They would bring girls together over lunch, define what girl bullying is, put on skits, and try to prevent, to give them some strategies. There was very little cost involved with that particular program. The biggest cost was bringing Rachel Sitmons into the district as a speaker to meet with all the girls. That happened last year and that was fairly expensive, the kind of thing that you can’t do all the time.

Response # 11C. I would have to say yes because we haven’t had any real lawsuits filed against us for not keeping kids safe or having any outbursts or real violent behavior from our kids. I have a hard time just understanding exactly what you mean within that, in terms of... (whatever you’re doing is probably working if you have not had any outbursts of school violence, however, I am curious how much money is allocated to school violence prevention programs) I always question our programs and if they are working. (Are they actually reaching the kids?) I’d like to think we’re effective with the violence issue, you know, we have very few fights at the high school, middle school and things like that. So I guess something it is working, whether it’s the discipline or whether it’s the prevention, I’m not sure.

Question # 12. Are there any other additional comments and concerns in regard to a superintendent’s decision-making practices for curriculum for school violence prevention?
In addition, is there any advice you would give to a new superintendent in regards to selecting and implementing curriculum for school violence prevention?

Response # 12A. First, we know that we can’t prevent it. If a student or an outsider is really intent on doing harm, unless it’s something that is observable in the school, we probably can’t prevent it. It can be unnerving to know that no matter what you do, you can’t prevent something from happening. And that’s what’s going to continue. My advice for superintendents would be to listen to your people. It’s the teachers who work with kids on a daily basis and the principals who have the best insight. As superintendent, we probably know the least about it. And finally, more important to me, a bad program implemented well is better that a good program implemented poorly. So the implementation level and paying attention to those details is probably the most critical aspect of it, in my opinion.

Response # 12B. One of my concerns that involves the potential of violence and is a growing problem for schools, is the whole Internet. We’ve been spending time bringing it in, and not only this year, we’ve done it for years, but getting the message out to parents and students is difficult. Youngsters often feel invisible. They post a lot of personal information on the Internet. I believe they could be a target and be very vulnerable. One area of concern that I have is this whole notion of the role of the Internet. The Internet is wonderful and does wonderful things, but is also an area that can be utilized by some sick people to take advantage of young people. So, one of the areas we’ve been focusing in on more recently is the whole Internet safety, if you will, for youngsters. We’ve
implemented the whole I-Safe program, which may be research based. It's a program that I know was involved in; it's a national program. I know the police have been involved in it. Basically, you go through certain lessons in your technology curriculum from upper elementary, middle school, and high school. I think we have to talk to kids about the ethics of the Internet and how they should be protecting themselves.

Response # 12C. I don’t think anyone should ever look at school violence prevention programs as a program in isolation. I think that whole concept has to extend well beyond the culture of a school. One of the things at that I have always admired is the relationship that the teachers always had with their kids. There was always an excessive caring in the hallways of the high school that showed you care about each other. I think you need that type of caring environment to prevent violent behavior. You know, violent behavior is a result of something. Sometimes it has to do with a more organic imbalance, chemical imbalance, but I’m sure that's a very small population of kids. But, if your environment is where kids are made to feel powerless or isolated, yeah, you’re going to get higher incidence. So, it’s not necessarily just giving a teacher a particular program to teach. I also think it extends into the community. Again, I’ll just use as an example, my upbringing was such that, there were police officers that got to know me, coaches that got to know me. There was a whole community concept and people didn’t just ignore you if you were acting out. It wasn’t just my parents’ responsibility that I had to watch out for. It was a coach saying, “What are you doing, you don’t act like this. A
neighbor saying, “What are you doing out this late?” I really think that violence among our youth is not just inherent to a particular program. I do think that school culture is a very big indicator and I don’t have any research to support that, but I really do think it’s well beyond just a program. That’s about my comment.

Summary of Findings

Given the magnitude of Columbine and 9/11, there was and still is a sense of urgency that school districts need to deal with myriad issues that are threatening the stability and overall mission of schools. That mission is “to educate students to be knowledgeable, responsible, socially skilled, healthy, caring, and contributing citizens” (Greenberg et al., 2003). School districts realized that it is impossible to succeed with this mission if violence looms over an educational environment. Administrators that have traditionally been looked upon as catalysts for reform now must listen to state legislators and the public because of their active role in the decisions that are being made in school districts. As a result, superintendents find themselves being expected to comply with new and demanding expectations set forth in such policies as the No Child Left Behind legislation (2001) coupled with pressures from local school boards, parents, and the community.

Interviewees were asked a series of questions covering four related areas involving a superintendent’s decision-making practices for school violence prevention programs. The four areas were: (a) needs assessment, (b) outcome evaluation, (c) process evaluation, and (d) cost-benefit analysis. All four areas addressed research questions one and two. The third research question was addressed through three focus group discussions with teachers.
Most of the comments by superintendents in response to the first area of questions regarding whether or not a district had compiled a needs assessment before selecting a school violence prevention program, were quite positive in that districts had initiated programs because of concerns of students, parents, teachers and/or administrators. Incidences such as Columbine prompted superintendents to take all threats seriously, until proven otherwise. For the most part, superintendents stated that their school violence prevention programs were 50/50, where half of their programs were based on hard data and half of their programs were based on concerns of students, teachers, parents, and/or administrators.

Districts updated crisis response plans after 9/11. One superintendent stated that their central office had no television and/or radio on 9/11, and as a result, had little contact with what was happening. Therefore, this district had televisions installed at their central office so that they could tune into the news as well as utilize the televisions for professional development.

For the most part, types and levels of school violence varied between the elementary, middle, and high school. In response to the second question on needs assessment, superintendents were asked, “To what extent do you believe school violence has impacted your students at the different levels?” The superintendents stated that the threat factor at each level needs to be taken seriously but might be seen a bit differently. For example, when a first grader says, “I am going to kill you,” and when a junior in high school says the same thing, teachers and administrators may approach them differently. Regardless, both situations must be dealt with to determine the severity of the threat. One superintendent said that children “have lost a little bit of the ability to be human.”
The highest level of concern for one of the superintendents was at the middle school level. This superintendent suggested that a student's self-esteem is paramount in preventing an outbreak of school violence. "If a student has good self-esteem, a student is less likely to commit acts of violence, and/or bullying, and/or use of drugs, and/or use of alcohol." At the high school level, physical fighting was a concern because of the student's ability to utilize their physical strength to harm another student. Fortunately, all three superintendents have not experienced a major incident or outbreak of violence within their respective districts.

The consensus amongst superintendents with regards to the third question on needs assessment, "What is the superintendent's responsibility with regard to selecting and implementing curriculum for school violence prevention?" is of a support role in that the principals must be "the ones who have the most input into the decisions" being made for school violence prevention. One superintendent stated, "I'm not involved in initiating. If I were to see a good program or learn about a good program in another school, I would bring that to the administration here and share what it is they are doing." One superintendent stated, "My responsibility is to make sure that decision-making in the lower levels is sound," while another superintendent stated that "I think that the superintendent is always responsible for the entire area of programs that a district implements."

The final question on needs assessment explored "how a superintendent made decisions when having the final say in selecting and implementing a school violence prevention program." Most comments made suggest that a superintendent serves a dual role when having the final say: one is of an overseer and two, as an ongoing consultant
for school violence prevention programs. One superintendent stated that, "I would look at what are the objectives, what are we trying to accomplish, what's involved in the program and I would want to know where it is successfully being implemented, what is the history in other districts." In addition, this superintendent was concerned with overall cost and time it would take to successfully train teachers as well as implement and evaluate the program. Thus, a needs assessment requires a district to make choices about how they wish to improve school safety through a process of collecting data to determine what school violence prevention programs would best serve the needs of the school, district and community.

The second area questions focused on outcome evaluation. "Once a program is in place, how does a superintendent evaluate whether or not a school violence prevention program is effective?" In response to this question, all three superintendents stated that it is important to have some type of baseline data in order to evaluate a program. One superintendent stated that "something that's kind of new to our schools, interestingly, is using data to make those (school violence prevention programs) decisions." One of the issues expressed by a superintendent is that now that they are beginning to collect data, how does a district utilize the data to improve upon the current situation. Another superintendent stated that it is difficult to measure certain types of school violence such as bullying.

The issue of improving test scores on state-mandated examinations places tremendous pressure on superintendents, principals, and teachers. Therefore, data for test scores is seen as most important, while data for school violence is often overlooked. The superintendents expressed that if an issue (school violence) is recurring within your
district, then it is important to investigate the cause or reasons, so that programs may be
developed to assist in combating the problem.

The second question in connection to outcome evaluation was, “How many
programs are research based and how many programs are not research based? What
programs are more effective? How do you know?” The responses of superintendents
suggested that roughly half of the programs in each district are research based and half of
the programs are not research based. When asked whether or not the programs were
effective, superintendents were unable to support programs with statistical data to prove
their overall effectiveness. One superintendent stated, “…that through peer mediation
and dialogue with principals, (school violence prevention) programs seem to work for the
children.”

The third area that the interview questions focused on was process evaluation.
The first question to address process evaluation was, “As a school district, what steps
have been taken to ensure safety and security for your faculty, staff, and students in the
event of a crisis situation?” In response to this question, all three superintendents made it
clear that their district has a crisis response manual as well as a crisis response team. One
superintendent responded that their district had worked out a plan with the local police
department’s emergency management bureau. Another superintendent responded,
“We’ve had drills where we block a stairway and make sure that kids can evacuate if
there’s some obstruction. The police have practiced in our building when school has not
been in session.” Superintendents suggested that prior to a crisis situation, it is important
that roles of administrators, teachers, parents, students, custodians, police, etc… are
already defined. One superintendent suggested that regardless of how much you prepare
for a crisis situation, sometimes things are out of your control. “It can be unnerving to
know that no matter what you do, you can’t prevent it.”

The second question in connection to process evaluation could also be categorized
under needs assessment. “How much input do teachers have on your decision-making
practices when selecting and implementing curricula for school violence prevention?” In
response to this question, all three superintendents stated that teachers have a great
amount of input on selecting and implementing curricula for school violence prevention.
One superintendent said that teachers had a great deal of involvement in curriculum for
school violence, that is, “assuming, they want that input. Sometimes, teachers are so
filled with their own curriculum, whether it’s social studies, that they don’t often have the
time. So, usually it’s the building level, whether it’s at the high school, they have a
cabinet, or at the middle school, it’s teaming. It comes up through the principals at the
school level. We don’t have a district-wide violence prevention team or program that
meets with teachers directly today.” Another superintendent suggested that it is more
important for the teachers to take the initiative because they work with the students on a
daily basis and not the superintendent.

The last area of questions focused on cost-benefit analysis. The question posed to
the superintendents was, “Are your current school violence prevention programs cost
effective?” In response to this question, all three superintendents believed that their
programs are working because they have not had a major incident of school violence
during their tenures. One superintendent suggested that because the government of New
Jersey initiated the Character Education Grant, there has been more funding and focus on
improving the safety of our schools. Another superintendent stated that it is difficult to
measure cost-effectiveness with school violence because there are many hidden variables that can be difficult to detect.

The final questions of the interview were, “Are there any other additional comments and concerns with regard to a superintendents’ decision-making practices for curriculum for school violence prevention? In addition, is there any advice you would give to a new superintendent with regards to selecting and implementing curriculum for school violence prevention?” In response to these questions, superintendent’s responses varied, and were rather broad because of the wide scope of possibilities. One superintendent said that “my advice for superintendents would be to listen to your people. It’s the teachers who work with kids on a daily basis, and the principals who have the best insight. As superintendent, we probably know the least about it. And finally, more important to me, a bad program implemented well is better than a good program implemented poorly. So implementation level and paying attention to those details is probably the most critical aspect of it, in my opinion.”

Another superintendent was concerned with students using the Internet. The Internet has opened up a variety of concerns. “Youngsters often feel invincible. They post a lot of personal information on the Internet. I believe that they could be a target.” The Internet, in many ways presents both the good and bad of technology. The Internet has endless possibilities to improve our current system of education, but it also presents risks for children.

The third superintendent suggested that school culture plays a major factor in ensuring the safety of a school system. When students feel isolated, incident rates of school violence will most likely be higher. The relationships of administrators to teachers,
teachers to students, administrators to students, and students to students are very important. When people feel that they are engaged, challenged, and known by name by faculty, they are more likely to succeed in school and less likely to commit acts of school violence.

**Focus Group**

Three focus groups were formed to assist in trying to understand the differences in perspectives between superintendents and teachers as they relate to decision-making practices for school violence prevention programs. Many times there is a breakdown of communication between central office, administrators, and teachers and as a result, poor decisions are made. The focus group discussion focused on the third research question: "How do teachers perceive their input on decision-making practices of a superintendent on curricula for school violence prevention?"

The focus group discussions were held in three various locations: a conference room, a classroom, and a faculty room. The teachers who participated in the focus group discussions ranged from elementary to middle school to high school levels.

1. We are here today to talk about school violence and the decision-making practices of your superintendent / administrators on curriculum for school violence prevention programs. Let’s start by making a list of three things that you really like about your school. Now let’s make another list indicating three things that you believe indicate some level of school violence in your school. Take a few minutes to do this...

2. Tell me about an example of violence you’ve witnessed or experienced in your school.
3. What causes violence?
   Listen for:
   a. Bullying
   b. Being Abused in the past
   c. Drugs
   d. Alcohol

4. What measure has your district as a whole taken to improve student relationships
   and to prevent future school violence?

5. How are your schools’ violence prevention programs being evaluated?

6. How much say do teachers have in creating, adopting and evaluating current
   programs?

7. What evidence exists that your current curriculum for school violence prevention
   programs in your district is research based?

8. What is your understanding of the decision-making practices of the
   superintendent for school violence prevention programs in your district?

Focus Group Discussion Results

The success and safety of any school relies heavily on the role of teachers.
Teachers are in contact with students in the classroom, in the hallways, in extracurricular
activities and in the community. In addition, teachers are in direct contact with parents
and administrators. This constant correspondence results in relationships that may be
built upon trust. According to teachers in the focus group discussions, students are more
likely to open up to them than an administrator because of the relationship factor.
At this time, only a handful of school violence prevention programs that are being utilized within the districts that participated in this study demonstrate some promising results. For the most part, teachers are uncertain about which programs are supported by data and/or determined to be effective. Given the lack of data, teachers feel that there are many inconsistencies with the selection, implementation, and evaluation of school violence prevention programs. Most of the teachers' comments suggest that school violence needs to be more clearly defined. As one respondent pointed out, "The consequences are not always consistent. If an administrator is not a strong leader, students will act up knowing that they are not going to be punished. As a result, certain behaviors can ultimately escalate into an act of school violence." Another teacher pointed out that "awareness is key. Aggressive/proactive collaboration with students, teachers, counselors, administrators, and central office is necessary. It is critical that there is an ear to the ground."

Teachers felt that openness in discussions on campus is important, citing that the breakdown of communication leads to most cases of school violence. Several teachers stated that school violence prevention programs are not being evaluated. Others included that there is a lack of school violence prevention programs in place. Frustration amongst some teachers suggests that policies may be in place but are not being enforced. One teacher suggested that "school principals are responsible for disseminating information that would allow teachers time to reflect and determine if they (teachers) are willing to buy into programs. On behalf of superintendents' role, they need to know what is going on in each school. A disconnect between teachers and central office can lead to big problems."
Several participants across different focus groups suggested that, in their views, a breakdown of family life is the root of many of the behaviors that lead to outbursts of school violence. Teachers stated that effective violence prevention programs are going to require collaborations between central office, administrators, parents, teachers, students and the community. Participants also mentioned that socioeconomic status is a factor when discussing school violence prevention. One participant stated that some administrators have different standards, policies, and punishments for dealing with people depending on "who you are and what your job is." This teacher suggested that this type of decision-making leads to many inconsistencies, whereas the principal caters to parents' requests and not necessarily teachers.

There were mixed responses to whether or not teachers felt that they had a say in selecting, implementing, and evaluating school violence prevention curriculum. Teachers suggested that "time" played a factor in choosing whether or not to participate in studying, selecting, implementing, and evaluating effective school violence prevention programs.

Teachers' perceptions of the decision-making practices of superintendents suggest that there is little to no connection at all. Several participants across different focus groups suggest that, in their views, it was up to the building level administrators to make decisions. However, some teachers expressed concern about what happens when a school has an ineffective leader. In this case scenario, these teachers believed that the superintendent must be involved in selecting, implementing, and evaluating school violence prevention programs.

School safety is clearly one of the most important components to creating an atmosphere for optimal learning. One teacher stated that
...if school violence is up there on the list of things that is very important, then we need to stress these concerns to our students, parents and community. If it (school violence prevention) is that important, and I think it is, administrators need to be more consistent and more willing to listen to as (teachers). What we’re experiencing as individuals, then as a department, then as a school, is not always communicated well, and as a result, isolationism can exist and lead to big problems.

The breakdown of communication between teachers, students, administrators and central office is one of the key factors for outbreaks of school violence. As stated earlier, “Awareness is key.”

The responses of teachers suggest that building level administrators must adopt programs that meet the needs of their district. A program designed for an inner city school adopted in a suburb probably will be ineffective and vice versa. Teachers suggested that more time must be made available to address issues of school violence. There must be more follow-ups. One workshop a year on school violence is not the answer to improving upon the safety of our schools. Since test scores seem to be the end all and be all for school districts, school violence is often pushed aside until a major incident takes place. In order to avoid a major incident, schools must be more proactive in selecting, implementing, and evaluating school violence prevention programs that are research based and meet the needs of their respective schools.

In summary, most participants were grateful for the opportunity to discuss school violence and the decision-making practices of superintendents. Most participants agree that education on school violence, in various forms, is one major step that a district can
take towards understanding and improving the safety and security of schools. “We need policy awareness, research-based programs and education on the issue of school violence.” By creating opportunities for open dialogue and research, a district can compile data that may be used to select, implement and evaluate the most effective programs for the composition of that district.

Summary

In this chapter, the nature of study, presentation of data, and summary of findings were presented. Chapter 5 of this study provides a summary and recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER V

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was two-fold. The first purpose of this study was to investigate the decision-making practices of three superintendents in northern New Jersey in selecting school violence prevention programs to determine if programs were data driven and research based. The second purpose of this study was to investigate how teachers perceived their input on the decision-making practices of their superintendents in the selection of school violence prevention programs.

The purpose of this chapter is to summarize the data that was collected in this study and make recommendations for future research. This chapter is divided into the following sections: (a) introduction, (b) summary of study, (c) findings in research, (d) implications, (e) recommendations for future research, and (f) concluding remarks.

Introduction

In chapter 1 of this study, the researcher presented: (a) the background of the problem, (b) changing dynamics of leadership, (c) statement of problem, (d) purpose of study, (e) research questions, (f) limitations, and (g) definition of terms. In chapter 2, the researcher completed a review of literature. Chapter 3 presented the methodology for this study. This chapter was divided into the following sections: (a) overview, (b) research sample, (c) research design, (d) techniques for data collection and analysis, (e) development of interview instrument and interview questions, (f) focus group questions, and (g) treatment of data. Chapter 4 contained the presentation and analysis of data. Chapter 5 will provide: (a) summary of study, (b) findings in research, (c) implications, (d) recommendations for future research, and (e) concluding remarks.
Summary of Study

Prior to the tragedy at Columbine High School in 1999, many school districts were not very effective at identifying students who were at risk to jeopardizing the lives of themselves, their peers, their teachers, their administrators, and their community. The morning of April 20, 1999, changed schools' safety programs forever. Columbine became the site of one of the worst school tragedies in history. The shooters, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, planned and prepared a day of revenge against a school community that made them feel like outcasts. This built-up anger and rage led to the deaths of 15 individuals. Since the Columbine tragedy, more data has been collected and analyzed to understand what causes school violence. This increased effort has led to startling results as to why certain students are more likely to do harm than others.

School administrators have become better at diagnosing problem behaviors in their districts. However, school administrators have not been able to prescribe strong solutions to their diagnoses. The increased pressure on administrators to create an educational environment that is safe and secure for students and teachers has led to a wide range of data and research. Yet, most of this data has not resulted in the development of research-based programs.

The awareness and understanding of the dynamics of school violence is of the utmost importance. Once schools have collected some data, then school administrators can propose some solutions. School administrators face tough decisions when guiding administrators in selecting, implementing, and evaluating school violence prevention programs because of the ever-growing uncertainty and skepticism of whether a program actually works and is cost effective (Brower & Balch, 2005).
The current literature review examined in this study suggests that there have been some exciting advances in school violence prevention programs in recent years. However, the majority of these programs still lack statistical data to support their overall effectiveness. There is little question that more research has to be done in the area of school violence prevention.

Most superintendents are aware that “violence, whether it be inside or outside of schools, deadens spirit, creates a nihilistic environment, and leads many young people to believe that their future is so bleak that education simply doesn’t matter” (NASBE, 1994, p. 3). Recurrent media coverage of school violence has led the public to believe that our schools are no longer safe. This type of negative communication between the media and public has trickled down into our school systems. Whenever a crisis occurs, the first questions asked are “Why did this happen?” and “How could have this been prevented?” The superintendent must be able to address these questions. The response to these questions and the district’s overall preparedness for crisis situations will be scrutinized by the media, faculty, and community.

The importance of this study was to assess the decision-making practices of superintendents for school violence prevention and to explore teachers’ perceptions of their superintendents’ decisions. By doing so, the researcher believed that data would reveal that there is a breakdown in communication between teachers and superintendents. In addition, given the current standards-based movement in education, districts must closely evaluate whether or not programs are in place and whether or not programs are working. Data is being requested more and more by the federal, state and local
government agencies to identify how safe schools are and to determine benchmarks for the future.

Findings in the Research

In the last 20 years, the position of superintendent has changed dramatically. According to Brunner and Bjork (2002), a superintendent now serves as a “clarifier,” “data-bearer,” “facilitator,” “knowledge generator,” and “leader” who must meet several demands. Because superintendents are under pressure to meet the needs of their students, their administrators, their teachers, their community, and policies set forth by the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), school districts have become result driven. School violence is often subjective to administrators’ and teachers’ perspectives especially when abuses are psychological. Nonetheless, superintendents will be blamed if there is a security breach and/or incident of school violence. According to Carter and Cunningham (1997):

The violence that has been afflicting society in general is slowly creeping into the schools. These changing social conditions have placed pressure on our schools to find ways to meet students’ needs. These and other growing demands have made the work of the superintendency much more complex, as they move education beyond its traditional boundaries. Issues creeping into the schools include intolerance, violence, homelessness, alcohol and drug abuse, physical and sexual abuse, sexually transmitted diseases such as AIDS, suicide, abortion, birth control, condom distribution, and many other hot topics. In the face of these issues, significantly large numbers of American youth are at risk of not realizing
their potential, and superintendents are being challenged to ensure that this does not happen. (p. 13)

In research question #1 superintendents were asked how they utilize data from within their district to select and implement curricula for school violence prevention. The response from all three superintendents interviewed was that data are not necessarily easy to come by. In regards to data for school violence, superintendents reported that it is not easy to pinpoint particular areas of a school campus or be made aware of particular threats that may jeopardize a school system. Superintendents rely heavily on building level administrators to make decisions.

When having the final say, one superintendent stated that, “I would look at, what are the objectives, what are we trying to accomplish, what’s involved in the program? I would want to know where it is successfully being implemented and what is the history in other districts?” In addition, this superintendent was concerned with overall cost and time it would take to successfully train teachers as well as implement and evaluate the program. Thus, a needs assessment requires a district to make choices about how they wish to improve school safety through a process of collecting data to determine what school violence prevention programs would best serve the needs of the school, district and community. Superintendents emphasized that administrators must know the story of their school, district and community.

The research findings were consistent with the superintendents’ responses and the research that a principal is the most important person when it involves the adoption of curriculum at his/her school. Because of decentralization of schools, the principal has been given greater responsibilities in the implementation of curriculum. A principal at a
site-based managed school is going to be held accountable by the standards set forth by the state and federal government. Andero (2000) said, “It is vital that the principal surrounds him/herself with a faculty that will help him/her in implementing a curriculum that will meet the special needs of the local community and students while meeting the expectations from state and federal government mandates” (p. 5).

In research question #2 superintendents were asked how they evaluate a school violence prevention program that is research based and/or a school violence prevention program that is not research based. In response to this question, all three superintendents stated that it is important to have some type of baseline data in order to evaluate a program. One superintendent stated that “something that’s kind of new to our schools, interestingly, is using data to make those (school violence prevention programs) decisions.” One of the issues expressed by a superintendent is that now that they are beginning to collect data, how does a district utilize the data to improve upon the current situation? Another superintendent stated that is difficult to measure certain types of school violence such as bullying.

According to Juvonen (2001), “Only a handful of violence prevention approaches have been evaluated, and even fewer have been deemed to be effective or even promising” (p. 1). Responses of superintendents suggest that only half of their programs were research based.

The issue of evaluation for school violence prevention programs prompted similar reactions from all three superintendents. When asked whether not the programs were effective, superintendents were unable to support programs with statistical data to prove their overall effectiveness. One superintendent stated, “...that through peer mediation
and dialogue with principals, (school violence prevention) programs seem to work for the children."

The criteria to change popular opinion and government policy to address school violence is going be a long and difficult process because administrators will be required to show evidence that prevention programs are working and will need time to do so (Sugai et al., 2000). According to the U.S. Department of Education’s (2002) study: *Wide Scope, Questionable Quality: Three Reports from the Study on School Violence and Prevention*, school districts must focus their efforts on “needs assessment, planning, increased use of research-based approaches, and monitoring of implementation” (Crosse et al., 2002, p.1).

In research question 3, the study shifted from the superintendents’ perspectives to:

“How do teachers perceive their input on decision-making practices of a superintendent on curricula for school violence prevention?” Within the framework of this question, three focus groups of teachers were formed from the districts of the superintendents that were interviewed. The teachers provided a tremendous amount of feedback on school violence, curriculum, and relationships between teachers, administrators and/or central office in connection to school violence prevention programs.

The responses from teachers varied on a few of the questions but overall, the focus groups suggested there are certain areas in school violence prevention that need to be addressed in all districts. Kowalski’s (1995) study is dated, yet, the data gathered from that study and the qualitative data collected in this study suggest that things have not really changed during the last 10 years.
Kowalski’s (1995) top 10 factors affecting the decision making of a superintendent are as follows:

1. Fiscal resources
2. Personal beliefs
3. Educational research
4. Input from administrative staff
5. Community socioeconomic conditions
6. School board member positions/opinions
7. Input from teachers
8. Community politics
9. Teacher union positions/pressure
10. Concerns for personal survival

Input from teachers was ranked number seven. Because teachers’ suggestions are not a top priority factoring into the decision-making practices of a superintendent, teachers are compelled to believe that their opinion is not important.

Teachers suggested that there are several areas that superintendents and administrators need to be made aware for school violence prevention. Research findings within this study and relevant research suggest that better communication is needed between administrators, counselors, and teachers in regards to school violence prevention programs. In addition, there needs to be more dialogue between teachers of different schools per se, such as elementary to middle and middle to high school. Teachers and guidance counselors can play an integral role in assisting each other and reducing the
incidences of school violence if there is better communication between the different levels.

Research findings suggest that school districts need more concrete data before selecting a program. Once a program is in place, districts need to collect data in order to measure the overall effectiveness of a program. As one teacher put it, “Awareness leads to empowerment.”

Implications

This study has important implications for research and practice. The analysis of the data from this study suggests that superintendents are more willing to create and rely on a viable organizational structure that supports school-based management for school violence prevention. By doing so, schools will be able to operate and make decisions from within, thereby selecting, implementing, and evaluating school violence prevention programs of their choice. While acknowledging this importance, superintendents need to realize that if something does go wrong, then they will have to respond to the media and community.

Defining school violence is a major concern for both teachers and superintendents alike. Since school violence is not always black and white, many times psychological and/or emotional abuses such as bullying, sexual harassment, and teasing is not reported. Thus, the data being utilized to select and implement curricula for school violence prevention may be inaccurate. In the focus group discussions, teachers indicated that they feel that there are many inconsistencies when implementing, evaluating, and enforcing school violence prevention programs. These inconsistencies have resulted in teachers being frustrated and unwilling to support new initiatives for school violence prevention.
Without the support of teachers, school violence prevention programs will most definitely fail. Therefore, superintendents must communicate to building level administrators the importance of selecting programs that can be successfully implemented and evaluated.

Superintendents face tremendous pressure under the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) because of the potential consequences. If a school falls into the category of "persistently dangerous" for 2 consecutive years, parents have the right to send their son/daughter to another school in the district and/or outside of the district depending upon the circumstances. The possibility of losing students to another school and/or district suggests that a school is failing to ensure the safety necessary to provide a "thorough and efficient education." In addition, a school district could lose funding from both the federal and state governments and/or be subject to state takeover.

The research implies that superintendents must be able to establish some type of baseline data. Once baseline data is available, districts can then research and select programs that match certain criteria relevant to the student population of that district. For school districts to successfully improve upon safety, communication at all levels must be improved. Many discussions about school violence tend to be swept under the carpet because schools are "so busy" preparing for standardized testing coupled with various projects and plans for state-of-the-art learning. When safety is no longer a primary concern, schools become vulnerable to outbreaks of violence. Schools must be proactive instead of reactive to school violence.
Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the findings and conclusions of this research, recommendations for future research are suggested in the following areas:

1. A more comprehensive study could include how school violence prevention programs factor into academic achievement and the quality of life in communities.

2. A research study into how physical security assessments affect decision-making practices of superintendents and building level administrators when selecting, implementing, and evaluating school violence prevention programs.

3. An adjustment in the design of this study could focus on the decision-making practices of principals for school violence prevention and try to determine if programs are data driven and/or randomly selected.

4. This study could be replicated to gather data from students perceptions of central office and school based leaders selecting, implementing, and evaluating school violence prevention programs.

5. A research study into how school violence affects students and teachers psychologically at the elementary, middle, and secondary levels.

6. This study could be used as a basis of comparison with the effects of terrorism on the decision-making practices of superintendents for crisis management plans.
7. A more in-depth study of a quantitative nature could involve one school violence prevention program that is supported by statistical data prior to and after implementation.

8. A quantitative and qualitative research study comparing the breakdown of home life and the number of incidences of school violence in urban districts.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of this research, recommendations for policy are suggested in the following areas:

1. Superintendents and local school boards should ensure that there is adequate training for all staff members necessary to effectively implement a school violence prevention program.

2. Superintendents and local boards must be able commit materials and resources necessary to collect data, analyze data, and draw conclusions from information gathered.

3. Superintendents and local boards should open up lines of communication with all facets of the community to determine the broader concerns when it involves the safety and security of schools.

4. School districts should provide professional development that focuses on the roles of faculty and staff members in the selection, implementation, and evaluation processes of a school violence prevention program.
5. Superintendents, local school boards, and district-level administrators should step back and reflect upon zero-tolerance policies, anti-bullying programs, and determine whether or not they are effective.

6. School districts are required to adhere to “The Unsafe School Choice Policy” as stated in the No Child Left Behind (2001) legislation (NCLB, 2001, Title IX, Part E, Subpart 2, SEC. 9532), which requires districts to offer school choice if a school is considered persistently dangerous.

Concluding Remarks
Since efficiency and control are the great aspirations of our society, school violence challenges leaders to think outside of the parameters of our success-oriented world to ensure safety and security for all students, teachers, and administrators. Since the Columbine tragedy in 1999 and the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the loss of innocence in our schools and in our country has challenged leaders to be more proactive when dealing with issues that may result in outbreaks of school violence. With the superintendent being the leader of a district, his or her decisions will ultimately play a major role in creating a safe and secure learning environment.

The purpose of this study was to assess the decision-making practices of superintendents for school violence prevention programs and to explore teachers’ perceptions of their input on the superintendent’s decision-making practices. Throughout the course of the interview sessions and focus group discussions, conclusions were reached that more research has to be done in the area of school violence prevention. In order for superintendents to make effective decisions, data must show that programs are
statistically supported to be effective. Therefore, schools can select programs that meet the needs of their district.

Communication is essential for the success of any program. There needs to be stronger dialogue between administrators, counselors, teachers, parents, and the community in regards to school violence prevention. A superintendent must try creating a district that embraces teamwork at all levels and between all levels that is per se, elementary schools to middle schools and middle schools to high schools. Most problems in society arise from a breakdown of communication. Strong collaborative leadership will keep communication lines open, therefore, information will flow more freely and keep educators more informed on potential risks. As one teacher put it, “Awareness is key.”

The safety and security of our schools is vital to creating an academic environment that can maximize student achievement.
References


*National Network for Child Care*. Retrieved June 1, 2005, from:

http://www.nncc.org/abuse/cc46_protect.child.html


Retrieved June 3, 2005, from:

http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3852/is_200001/ai_n8881979


http://www.educationworld.com/a_issues/issues303.shtml


www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3673/is_200304/ai_n9232831/print
Appendices
Appendix A

Informed Consent for Superintendents
INFORMED CONSENT
FOR SUPERINTENDENTS

Researcher Affiliation: This research project is part of the dissertation research that fulfills the requirements of Doctorate in Educational Administration and Supervision K-12 (Ed. D.) within the Department of Educational Leadership at Seton Hall University.

Purpose and Duration of Research: The purpose of the research is two-fold. First, three superintendents will be interviewed in order to investigate their decision-making practices for selecting school violence prevention programs and to determine if the programs were data driven and research based. Second, three focus group discussions of teachers will be conducted in order to investigate how teachers perceive their input on the decision-making practices of superintendents in selecting school violence prevention programs. The expected duration of the superintendent participation will be limited to a forty-minute session consisting of a face-to-face interview conducted by the researcher. The focus group interviews of teachers is expected to take one hour.

Procedures: Once written acknowledgement is received, stating superintendents' willingness to participate in the study, superintendents will be contacted in order to describe the process, time and date for the interview and focus group discussion of teachers. The procedure for the interview is that the researcher will meet the superintendent at his or her office for a single forty-minute interview session. Twelve identical questions will be utilized in each of the three interviews of superintendents. Data will be recorded and transcribed from interviews only upon written consent.

The procedure for the focus group discussion will be that the researcher will solicit teachers from the districts of the superintendents who agreed to participate in the study. The first six teachers to respond to the letter of solicitation will be selected to participate in the study. The teachers will then be contacted again via a letter sent to their school, informing him/her of the date, time, and place of meeting for the focus group discussion. The focus group discussions will be led by a third party who has been trained in leading a group interview and will allow teachers to speak freely on school violence through eight guided questions.

Instrumentation: Interview questions for superintendent will be open-ended and will pertain to background, initiatives and opinions of the superintendent. In addition, questions will focus on if programs are data driven and research based. Focus group discussions will allow teachers to speak freely on school violence through eight guided questions.

Voluntary Nature: Participation in this qualitative study is strictly voluntary for superintendents and teachers.

Anonymity: All responses to interviews and focus group discussions will remain anonymous. Participants will be identified by a coded system.

Confidentiality: All information that will be shared will be held strictly confidential and will be used for purposes of this study.

Seton Hall University
Institutional Review Board
JAN 04 2006

College of Education and Human Services
Department of Education Leadership, Management and Policy
Tel: 973.761.3597
400 South Orange Avenue • South Orange, New Jersey 07079-0683

Expiration Date
JAN 04 2007

Approval Date

ENRICHING THE MIND, THE HEART AND THE SPIRIT
Records of Confidentiality: Transcripts and tapes will be safely stored and locked for three years upon completion this research at which that point, the transcripts and tapes will then be destroyed. All data gathered from responses will be confidential.

Risks or Discomforts of Research Participation: There are no anticipated risks or discomforts from participation in this study research.

Benefits to Participation: The findings of this study can be helpful for superintendents and administrators in selecting school violence prevention programs that are most effective as proven through research and that have been endorsed by teachers. The focus group discussions will provide superintendents feedback on teachers’ perceptions of a district’s overall preparedness for school violence. In addition, the line of questioning will allow superintendents and teachers to reflect upon their school district. A period of reflection can be beneficial to understanding how school violence prevention programs may improve safety, security and learning.

Remuneration: Subjects will not be paid or given any other type of remuneration.

Description of Compensation/Medical Treatments for Injured Participants: There is no risk of injury for participation in this study.

Alternative Procedures for Treatment for Injured Participants: There is no risk of injury for participation in this study.

Contact Information: If participants have questions for the researcher or would like a final copy of the report, they may contact – Darren Petersen, Hackensack High School, First and Beech Streets, Hackensack, NJ 07601, 201-646-7980, and/or by contacting the researcher’s advisor – Dr. Anthony Colilda, Jubilee Hall – Room 406, Seton Hall University, 400 South Orange, NJ 07079, 973.761.9389, and/or the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 973.313.6314.

Audio tapes: Participants signature below indicates permission to audio tape interview and/or focus group discussion. Participants will be identified by a coded system. The researcher will be the only individual who has access to the audiotapes. In addition, the researcher will be the only person to listen to the audiotapes. The tapes will be transcribed by the researcher and safely stored and locked for three years upon completion of this research at which that point, the transcripts and tapes will then be destroyed. All data gathered from responses will be confidential.

All subjects will receive a signed and dated copy of the Informed Consent Form.
Appendix B

Informed Consent for Teachers
INFORMED CONSENT
FOR TEACHERS

Researcher Affiliation: This research project is part of the dissertation research that fulfills the requirements of Doctorate in Educational Administration and Supervision K-12 (Ed. D.) within the Department of Educational Leadership at Seton Hall University.

Purpose and Duration of Research: The purpose of the research is two-fold. First, three superintendents will be interviewed in order to investigate their decision-making practices for selecting school violence prevention programs and to determine if the programs were data driven and research based. Second, three focus group discussions of teachers will be conducted in order to investigate how teachers perceive their input on the decision-making practices of superintendents in selecting school violence prevention programs. The expected duration of the superintendent participation will be limited to a forty-minute session consisting of a face-to-face interview conducted by the researcher. The focus group interview of teachers is expected to take one hour.

Procedures: Once written acknowledgement is received, stating superintendents’ willingness to participate in the study, superintendents will be contacted in order to describe the process, time and date for the interview and focus group discussion of teachers. The procedure for the interview is that the researcher will meet the superintendent at his or her office for a single forty-minute interview session. Twelve identical questions will be utilized in each of the three interviews of superintendents. Data will be recorded and transcribed from interviews only upon written consent.

The procedure for the focus group discussion will be that the researcher will solicit teachers from the districts of the superintendents who agreed to participate in the study. The first six teachers to respond to the letter of solicitation will be selected to participate in the study. The teachers will then be contacted again via a letter sent to their school, informing him/her of the date, time, and place of meeting for the focus group discussion. The focus group discussions will be led by a third party who has been trained in leading a group interview and will allow teachers to speak freely on school violence through eight guided questions.

Instrumentation: Interview questions for superintendent will be open-ended and will pertain to background, initiatives and opinions of the superintendent. In addition, questions will focus on if programs are data driven and research based. Focus group discussions will allow teachers to speak freely on school violence through eight guided questions.

Voluntary Nature: Participation in this qualitative study is strictly voluntary for superintendents and teachers.

Anonymity: All responses to interviews and focus group discussions will remain anonymous. Participants will be identified by a coded system.

Confidentiality: All information that will be shared will be held strictly confidential and will be used only for purposes of this study.

EXPIRATION DATE: JAN 04 2007

ENRICHING THE MIND, THE HEART AND THE SPIRIT
Records of Confidentiality: Transcripts and tapes will be safely stored and locked for three years upon completion of research at which point, the transcripts and tapes will then be destroyed. All data gathered from responses will be confidential.

Risks or Discomforts of Research Participation: There are no anticipated risks or discomforts from participation in this research study.

Benefits to Participation: The findings of this study can be helpful for superintendents and administrators in selecting school violence prevention programs that are most effective as proven through research and that have been endorsed by teachers. The focus group discussions will provide superintendents feedback on teachers’ perceptions of a district’s overall preparedness for school violence. In addition, the line of questioning will allow superintendents and teachers to reflect upon their school district. A period of reflection can be beneficial to understanding how school violence prevention programs may improve safety; security and learning.

Remuneration: Subjects will not be paid or given any other type of remuneration.

Description of Compensation/Medical Treatments for Injured Participants: There is no risk of injury for participation in this study.

Alternative Procedures for Treatment for Injured Participants: There is no risk of injury for participation in this study.

Contact Information: If participants have questions for the researcher or would like a final copy of the report, they may contact – Darren Peterson, Hackensack High School, First and Beech Streets, Hackensack, NJ 07601, 201.646.7960, and/or by contacting the researcher’s advisor - Dr. Anthony Colella, Jubilee Hall – Room 406, Seton Hall University, 400 South Orange, NJ 07079, 973.761.9389, and/or the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 973.313.6314.

Audiofiles: Participants signature below indicates permission to audiotape interview and/or focus group discussion. Participants will be identified by a coded system. The researcher will be the only individual who has access to the audiotapes. In addition, the researcher will be the only person to listen to the audiotapes. The tapes will be transcribed by the researcher and safely stored and locked for three years upon completion of this research at which point, the transcripts and tapes will then be destroyed. All data gathered from responses will be confidential.

All subjects will receive a signed and dated copy of the Informed Consent Form.
Appendix C

IRB Letter of Approval to Conduct Research
January 4, 2006

Daten Petersen  
62 Park Ave. – 1st Floor  
Allendale, NJ 07401

Dear Mr. Petersen,

The Seton Hall University Institutional Review Board has reviewed the information you have submitted addressing the concerns for your proposal entitled “A Qualitative Assessment of Superintendents Decision-Making Practices in Selecting School Violence Prevention Programs”. Your research protocol is hereby approved as revised through expedited review. The IRB reserves the right to recall the proposal at any time for full review.

Enclosed for your records are the signed Request for Approval form and the stamped original Consent Form. Make copies only of this stamped Consent Form.

The Institutional Review Board approval of your research is valid for a one-year period from the date of this letter. During this time, any changes to the research protocol must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to their implementation.

According to federal regulations, continuing review of already approved research is mandated to take place at least 12 months after this initial approval. You will receive communication from the IRB Office for this several months before the anniversary date of your initial approval.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Mary F. Rizzella, Ph.D.  
Professor  
Director, Institutional Review Board

cc: Dr. Anthony Coletta

Office of Institutional Review Board  
President's Hall  
Tel: 973.333.3361 • Fax: 973.275.2978  
400 South Orange Avenue • South Orange, New Jersey 07079-2841

ENRICHING THE MIND, THE HEART AND THE SPIRIT
Appendix D

Completion Certificate
Human Participants Protection Education for Research Teams
This is to certify that

Darren Petersen

has completed the Human Participants Protection Education for Research Teams online course, sponsored by the National Institutes of Health (NIH), on 09/16/2004.

This course included the following:

- key historical events and current issues that impact guidelines and legislation on human participant protection in research.
- ethical principles and guidelines that should assist in resolving the ethical issues inherent in the conduct of research with human participants.
- the use of key ethical principles and federal regulations to protect human participants at various stages in the research process.
- a description of guidelines for the protection of special populations in research.
- a definition of informed consent and components necessary for a valid consent.
- a description of the role of the IRB in the research process.
- the roles, responsibilities, and interactions of federal agencies, institutions, and researchers in conducting research with human participants.

National Institutes of Health

http://www.nih.gov