

Saying No to Zero Tolerance

Alberta educators are using an integrated, safe-schools program that works well.

By Stephen Cole

Although zero-tolerance legislation is still on the books in Ontario, educators have moved away from the language of what one principal calls “one-size-fits-all” correctives. Elsewhere, the concept is an out-right pejorative. “I have zero tolerance for zero tolerance,” Nova Scotia Education Minister Jane Purves has said.

Not one of the 20 educators contacted for this story endorsed zero tolerance. Most felt the time had come for a more proactive strategy. The good news is that the prototype for an integrated, safe-schools program may already be in place in a province that seldom gets credit for progressive social policies: Alberta.

The Alberta Teachers’ Association’s Safe and Caring School Project, a voluntary program partly funded by the provincial government, is in place in more than 550 of the province’s 1,800 public schools, says former program manager Barb Maheu.

The project, which began in 1996, considered and abandoned zero tolerance as a safe-school remedy because “a mountain of evidence suggested it didn’t work,” says Maheu. A veteran teacher, she believes that “problems don’t go away simply because you outlaw them.”

The initiative gained momentum after the April, 1999, rifle slaying of Jason Lang, a 17-year-old student at W.R. Myers high school in Taber.

The governing philosophy of the Alberta program “is that you can’t promote a healthy value system in schools through punishment or by offering stand-alone, virtue-of-the-month classes. Safety and respect for others have to be the foundation of school life.”

In addition to reinforcing positive values through the curriculum, the project incorporates programs that address school culture, staff development, and student behaviour, the latter through modeling programs that involve parents and community coaches.

Some Safe and Caring Schools

- Teachers and staff at **Mill Creek School in Edmonton** choose one “pro-social” skill to teach each month. Skills include co-operation, respect, and manners. Once a month, students are recognized in school assemblies for positive behaviour.
- Parents, students, and staff have developed a Code of Conduct for **Alexandra School in Medicine Hat**. It encourages “stakeholders” (parents, students, and teachers) to help students become “positive, productive citizens.”
- **Annie L. Gaetz School in Red Deer** recognizes individual students — through Student of the Week awards and other distinctions — at regular assemblies. Often 50 to 100 parents attend.
- Students in junior-high classes at **Laurier Heights School in Edmonton** are paired with buddies in elementary classes. The groups participate in joint activities several times a year to help make younger students feel more secure and to foster a sense of responsibility among the older students.
- The Learning to Care program at **Chester Ronning School in Camrose** allows students to offer volunteer help to special-needs students, senior citizens, or students in younger grades at the school.
- Classes at **Lakeview Elementary School in Lethbridge** conduct a weekly 30-minute meeting to allow students to discuss and resolve safety issues in the school and on the playground. Students record incidents in a classroom book throughout the week.
- **Buchanan School in Calgary** gives Superkid awards — students who are observed doing a good deed have their names entered in a draw. One name is drawn each week, and the winner gets a Superkid prize.

“Our program uses every aspect of school life to promote respect and understanding. When children are learning to read in grade 2, they learn language skills while reading books like *The Sissy Duckling* that promote tolerance. All available research suggests that when schools take a comprehensive approach to dealing with violence, bullying can be reduced by over 50%.”

The best example of the Alberta safe-schools program might be Ecole Rocky, a 500-student French-immersion, kindergarten-to-grade-6 school located in Rocky Mountain House, a small town in the foothills.

There, a program employs up to 20% of the student body as school peacekeepers. “We have 50 to 100 students trained at any one time as conflict managers,” principal Bill Snyder reports.

Still, the success of Alberta’s safe-school program rests on preventing problems rather than on trying to solve problems that have already arisen. “We don’t want to bombard kids with rules,” Mr. Snyder says. “We want to provide them with a model for working peacefully.”

The Rev. Dale Lang, father of the child who died in Taber, has a personal interest in seeing schools become safer. He says it doesn’t serve his purpose to become involved in the zero-tolerance debate, but he makes it clear where his sympathies reside.

“Obviously, if some kid’s behaviour is way out there in left field, the school might want to take some course of action,” he says.

“But at the same time, throwing a kid out of school isn’t going to solve the problem. You have to reach that kid somehow, not push him away. Because, in the end, there is nothing that prevents a troubled student from returning to that school and causing awful, awful trouble. We know that too well now.”

(Adapted with permission from The Globe and Mail, Aug. 30, 2003)