

Suicide Prevention in Schools

Policy makers remain in conflict over whether schools should play a institutionalized role in preventing student suicide. Another *Center Policy Issues Analysis Brief* focuses on the issue of school involvement in mental health screening and identification

(see *Screening Mental Health Problems in Schools* – online at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/policyissues/mhscreeningissues.pdf>).

This brief highlights two other major related questions that are at issue:

- Does Suicide Education Stigmatize Some Students & Increase the Risk of Suicide Ideation?
- Should Schools be Involved in Monitoring Students identified as Suicidal Risks ?

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Issue: Does Suicide Education Stigmatize Some Students & Increase the Risk of Suicide Ideation?

Educational programs to prevent student suicide are designed to increase student and faculty knowledge of the phenomena. They typically focus on informing students about warning signs and where to get help in times of crisis.

Concerns have been raised that increased knowledge may have some negative consequences. For one, it has been suggested that such programs may inadvertently add to the tendency to stigmatize those in are identified as needing help. In turn, the stigmatization may cause suffering students to be less willing to get help and exacerbate their negative feelings about self and others. There is also concern that increased knowledge may contribute to the type of “suicide contagion” among students that has been reported following a peer’s suicide.

Examples of what one hears:

Universal suicide education programs in schools are essential because they teach “at-risk” students where to find help, and they give others the ability to recognize when their peers are at risk.

Students “at-risk” for suicide already feel socially isolated; putting a spotlight on them will make them feel worse.

Suicide education programs can promote mental health in schools, and they are easy to implement.

Suicide education teaches students how to commit suicide if they didn’t know how to already.

Formal Positions:

- *Pro* – Those in favor of universal suicide education in schools see the programs as an efficient (easy to implement) and effective suicide prevention strategy. They argue knowledge is power – “at-risk” individuals benefit from info on how to receive help and their peers learn warning signs so they can play a role in ensuring those “at risk” are guided to help. Moreover, they suggest that the programs can have additional mental health benefits.
- *Con* – Those who argue against suicide education in schools stress that such programs can prompt suicidal thinking, teach suicide as an acceptable option in responding to problems (and even glorify suicide), teach students how to do it, and contribute to a contagion effect.
Additionally, they warn that promoting awareness and vigilance for suicide warning signs may increase the stigma surrounding mental health concerns and exacerbate hesitation in seeking help.
- *Pro with reservations* – This position stresses that, unless the programs are well designed and implemented by highly qualified professionals, there is a significant danger of producing some of the negative effects that are raised by those who argue against suicide education in schools. In such cases, these programs could end up doing more harm than good.

Examples of Documents Related to the Issue:

(a) *Related to Both Sides*

- >> *Media Contagion and Suicide Among the Young* by M. Gould, P. Jameson, & D. Romer – <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/hs/medical/bioethics/nyspi/material/MediaContagionAndSuicide.pdf>
- >> *Stigma and Suicide* by Prevent Suicide Now.com – <http://www.preventsuicidenow.com/stigma-and-suicide.html>
- >> *Stigma: Building Awareness And Understanding About Mental Illness* by the National Mental Health Association – <http://www.nmha.org/infoctr/factsheets/14.cfm>
- >> *Suicide Contagion and the Reporting of Suicide: Recommendations from a National Workshop* by the Center for Disease Control – <http://wonder.cdc.gov/wonder/prevguid/m0031539/m0031539.asp>
- >> *Summary of National Strategy for Suicide Prevention: Goals and Objectives for Action* by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services – <http://www.mentalhealth.org/publications/allpubs/SMA01-3518/default.asp#goal1>
- >> *Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent Suicide* by the Department of Health and Human Services <http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/calltoaction/calltoaction.pdf>
- >> *The Prevention, Recognition, and Management of Young People at Risk of Suicide: Development of Guidelines for Schools* by The Ministry of Education (New Zealand) http://www.nzgg.org.nz/guidelines/0028/Development_of_guidelines__.pdf

(b) *On the Pro Side*

- >> *Common Misconceptions About Suicide* by Suicide Awareness Voices of Education <http://www.save.org/prevention/misconceptions.html>
- >> *Youth Suicide Prevention Programs: A Resource. Chapter 4: General Suicide Education* by The Center for Disease Control <http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/dvp/Chapter%204.PDF>

(c) *On the Con Side*

- >> *Societal Stigma Closes the Caskets from Suicide* by Alvin B. Janski http://www.namistl.org/images/pdf/articles/social_stigma.pdf
- >> *Youth Suicide Fact Sheet* by SafeYouth.org <http://www.safeyouth.org/scripts/facts/suicide.asp>
- >> Vieland, V., Whittle, B., Garland, A., Hicks, R, et al. (1991). The impact of curriculum-based suicide prevention programs for teenagers: An eighteen-month follow-up. *Journal of the American Academy of Child Adolescent Psychiatry*, 37, 484-487.
This study examined the efficacy of curriculum based suicide prevention programs. More specifically, the authors examined actual help-seeking behaviors and suicide morbidity in relation to exposure to such programs. They suggest that there is no “convincing evidence of any program effect” and that when programs were conducted indiscriminately, these programs often displayed negative effects.

Summary of Key Issues

Pro Arguments for Suicide Education Prevention Programs in Schools

- Gives “at-risk” students options for help that they might not know about
- Gives students and staff the knowledge they need to recognize warning signs so that they can help guide those in need to resources
- Efficient and easy to implement
- Can have additional mental health benefits

Con Arguments for Suicide Education Prevention Programs in Schools

- May exacerbate a student’s problems by increasing stigma and may enhance reluctance to seek help
 - May increase suicide ideation, sanction suicide, “teach” students how to do it, and contribute to suicide contagion effects
 - Some evidence suggests the programs are not effective
 - If not implemented correctly and carefully, they may do more harm than good
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Issue: Should Schools be Involved in Monitoring Students Identified as Suicidal Risks ?

For schools to monitor students identified as suicidal risks raise questions about whether this should be the school's role, and if so, who should do it.

Concerns arise about parental consent, privacy and confidentiality protections, staff qualifications, involvement of peers, negative consequences of monitoring (especially for students who are false positive identifications), and access and availability of appropriate assistance.

Examples of what one hears:

School staff are well-situated to keep an eye on kids who are at risk for suicide.

Teachers can't be expected to take on another task and aren't qualified to monitor such students.

Such monitoring can be done by qualified student support staff.

Monitoring infringes on the rights of families and students.

It's irresponsible not to monitor anyone who is a suicidal risk.

It's inappropriate to encourage kids to "spy" on each other.

Monitoring is needed so that steps can be made to help quickly.

Monitoring has too many negative effects.

Formal Positions:

- *Pro* – Those arguing that schools should monitor stress that it is essential to monitor anyone who is a suicidal risk so that help can be provided quickly. Moreover, they believe school staff are well-situated to do so, and staff (and even students) can be trained to do it appropriately and with effective safeguards for privacy and confidentiality, and that the positive benefits outweigh any negative effects.
- *Con* – As with many practices related to mental health in schools, a basic argument against monitoring students identified "at risk" is the position that the practice infringes on the rights of families and students. Other arguments stress that teachers should not be distracted from teaching and , moreover, teachers and other non-clinically trained school staff are ill-equipped to do the monitoring. And, it is inappropriate to encourage students to play a monitoring role. Additionally, it is stressed that existing monitoring practices are primarily effective in following those that have already attempted suicide and that monitoring others has too many negative effects (e.g., costs are seen as outweighing potential benefits).

Examples of Documents Related to the Issue:

- >> *Youth Suicide Prevention Programs: A Resource. Chapter 2: School Gatekeeper Training*
by The Center for Disease Control
<http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/dvp/Chapter%202.PDF>
- >> *Youth Suicide Prevention Programs: A Resource. Chapter 5: Screening Programs*
by The Center for Disease Control
<http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/dvp/Chapter%205.PDF>
- >> *Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent Suicide*
by the Department of Health and Human Services
<http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/calltoaction/calltoaction.pdf>
- >> *Child Suicide and the Schools*
Editorial in Pediatrics
<http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/cgi/content/full/106/5/1167>

*Note: As with most issues related to mental health in schools, there remains a sparsity of research to support positions that could be enlightened by empirical study.

Summary of Key Issues

Pro Arguments for School Involvement in Monitoring Students Identified as Suicidal Risks

- It is essential to monitor anyone who is a suicidal risk so that help can be provided quickly.
- School staff are well-situated to do so.
- Staff (and even students) can be trained to do it appropriately.
- Effective safeguards for privacy and confidentiality.
- positive benefits outweigh any negative effects.

Con Arguments for School Involvement in Monitoring Students Identified as Suicidal Risks

- The practice infringes on the rights of families and students.
 - Teachers should not be distracted from teaching.
 - Teachers and other non-clinically trained school staff are ill-equipped to do the monitoring.
 - It is inappropriate to encourage students to play a monitoring role.
 - Existing monitoring practices are mainly useful for following the very few students who have already attempted suicide.
 - Negative effects of monitoring others outweighs potential benefits.
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