This publication summarizes the 1999 Metropolitan Life Survey (MetLife) of the American Teacher, Violence in America's Public Schools: Five Years Later, highlighting findings from conversations in four local education fund (LEF) communities. The MetLife study surveyed and interviewed students, teachers, and law enforcement officials. Overall, school violence was as much or more of a problem than it was 5 years earlier. All three groups mentioned lack of parental supervision, peer pressure, and drugs or alcohol involvement as the top causes of violence. Most teachers and students felt safe at school. Teachers and students in urban areas were more likely to consider gang violence a problem than those in suburban or rural areas. Participants in LEF conversations defined school safety broadly. They considered many MetLife survey findings true in their communities. They were poised to broker connections and advocacy in their communities and promote school safety. They stressed the need for: full implementation and enforcement of code of conduct policies; provision of safe routes to school; better cultural understanding between staff and students; and school security. LEFs planned to disseminate their findings of local community readiness and capacity to address health and social service needs and violence prevention among students. (SM)
Increasing Safety in America's Public Schools
Lessons from the Field

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Public Education Network
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Increasing Safety in America’s Public Schools

Over the past decade, Americans have witnessed a steady escalation in the number and type of brutal violent attacks in our public schools. These actions have many worrying about the safety of their own children, but the reality is that America’s schools are still among the safest places a child can be on a daily basis. This is not to say that school violence is not a problem that requires vigilance and attention at the national and local levels.

Even though the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report that violent acts by American high school students declined between 1991 and 1997, we have reason to be concerned and to take action. Though the most extreme forms of violence are rare, the threat of all kinds of violence can keep students away from school, prevent them from going to after-school events, and leave them in fear every day. Fear of harm or violence prevents active learning and high student achievement.

Close to 53 million young people go to our nation’s schools each day, and ensuring their safety is a major issue for parents, teachers, administrators, and students. Recent events and increased media attention to safety issues have only increased the public’s focus on this issue. Our communities deserve safe schools that educate kids and help keep neighborhoods safer. Making schools safe places for students and adults is the whole community’s concern—teachers, parents, students, policy makers, law enforcement officers, business managers, faith leaders, civic leaders, youth workers, and other concerned community residents.
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As the Public Education Network (PEN) and its member local education funds (LEFs) are committed to creating systems of public education that result in high achievement for every child, we believe that equal opportunity, access to quality public schools, and an informed citizenry are all critical components of a democratic society. Part of making available a high-quality public education is ensuring that students and teachers spend their days in safe schools, which are free from violence, free from fear of harassment and threatening situations, and conducive to teaching and learning.

Five local education funds have helped their communities broach these difficult issues with conversations on national and local issues of safety and violence in schools. During the last part of 2000, more than 250 people participated in conversations in Buffalo, NY; Lancaster, PA; McKeesport, PA; and Paterson, NJ. In February 2001, the local education fund in Atlanta, GA hosted a conversation that included students, teachers, principals, law enforcement officials, parents, and other community leaders.

These local education funds conducted their community dialogues on school safety and violence as part of an assessment of their community's readiness and capacity to address the health and well being of children in their public schools. This assessment included looking into issues of health insurance coverage, coordination of health and social services for children and their families, maintaining safe learning environments, and the level of resources devoted to children's health and social services. Participants, therefore, understood that these community dialogues are not just "one-shot" efforts at addressing school safety and violence but as a part of a more comprehensive approach to address the systemic issues affecting children in their public schools.

The local education funds used The 1999 Metropolitan Life Survey of the American Teacher, Violence in America's Public Schools: Five Years Later, as a starting place for their conversations, to ground their local experiences in a national context. This Lessons from the Field provides a summary of the MetLife survey and highlights findings from the conversations in four local education fund communities. (Law enforcement officials are referred to in this publication as "officers." All teachers and students referred to here are from public schools, and all "schools" referred to are public schools.)

National View of School Safety: The MetLife Survey

The 1999 Metropolitan Life Survey of the American Teacher, Violence in America's Public Schools: Five Years Later, underscores that school violence is still as much or more of a problem than it was five years ago, even as the nation as a whole sees decreases in overall crime. The MetLife study investigated the issue of school violence from the perspectives of students, teachers, and law enforcement officials. For the study, MetLife surveyed 1,044 students in grades 3 through 12 and interviewed 1,000 public school teachers in grades 3 through 12 and 100 law enforcement officials. The findings of the MetLife survey include:
All three groups mention common top three causes of school violence: lack of parental supervision, peer group pressure, and involvement with drugs or alcohol.

Students who are more likely to be victims of school violence are more likely to have been suspended or expelled from school, live in neighborhoods with a lot or some crime, and have hardly any or no parental involvement with school.

Officers report that most acts of violence occur in school neighborhoods, while one-third of teachers and students perceive that most happen on school grounds.

The majority of teachers feel very safe while they are at school. They are, however, more likely than five years ago to have been a victim of a violent act. Two-thirds of students are not worried about being attacked at or around school, but in both 1993 and 1999, one-quarter of students had been victims of a violent act at or near school.

Large numbers of teachers and officers reported that girls are more involved as aggressors in violence than they were five years ago.

Teachers and students in urban areas are more likely to perceive gang violence as a problem and playing a big part in daily life than do those in suburban or rural areas.

One in eight students report that they have carried a weapon to school, the same number as in 1993 and about the same number in urban as compared to suburban/rural areas. Students and officers mention knives as the most frequent weapon in schools, whereas teachers mention handguns.

### A Broad View of School Safety

Local education funds define school safety broadly, with some or all of the following components.

- Well maintained and secure school facilities, with controlled entries and hall monitors
- A safe route for students to travel to and from school
- Counseling, mental health services, and programs to foster self-esteem
- Peer mediation and conflict management programs
- Substance awareness and abuse prevention education
- Race and cultural awareness and programs to promote tolerance
- Police presence in schools and positive relationships between police officers and students
- Code of conduct policies
- Emergency procedure manuals

In Lancaster, community members described a safe school as an atmosphere where people don’t have to think or worry about safety issues. Students in Buffalo described a safe school atmosphere as clean, well lit, properly maintained, and cheerful, with teachers who are friendly and supportive. They attributed the principal with the power to create a safe atmosphere by “not putting up with” any kind of trouble.

### LEF Experiences

Participants found that many of the conclusions in *The 1999 Metropolitan Life Survey of the American Teacher, Violence in America’s Public Schools: Five Years Later*, were also true in their local communities.
and they expressed further ideas about the causes of violence and unsafe environments in and around schools. Below are specific local findings in categories similar to the MetLife report.

Causes of Unsafe School Environments
Community members in Paterson agreed that the sharp racial divide between students and teachers is a significant contributing factor to unsafe situations in schools. The school staff in Paterson is 80% white, while the student population is 95% children of color. In addition, community members reported that classroom mannerisms show that some teachers set low expectations for children of color, and students respond with disruptive behavior or by refusing to learn.

Students in Buffalo see that violent situations in their own schools are often caused by students who transfer from other schools.

In Lancaster, principals said they do not have the personnel they need to provide sufficient supervision outside classrooms, in school bathrooms, locker rooms, hallways, and playgrounds. The police perceived school staff as too tolerant of disruptive behaviors. But teachers expressed fear of not being supported by administrative staff or of being assaulted by students as reasons for not disciplining disruptive students.

School nurses in the Mon Valley attributed some school violence problems to an increase in mental health issues among students, including depression and others for which nurses dispense a greater amount of medication than they have in past years. Community members in the Mon Valley ranked lack of family and community involvement as second in their top five health and safety concerns.

Who is Likely to be a Victim of School Violence
In Buffalo, officers described students who were most likely to be victims as weaker, different (physically, cognitively, or in their upbringing), and lacking street smarts (and therefore more likely to be bullied by other students). Students agreed, but also added that violence is random, often coming from kids trying to prove something, or who are just plain crazy. Students and teachers both agreed that new, inexperienced and substitute teachers, and those who don’t know how to recognize the start of a violent situation, are more likely to be victims of violence.

Growing Violent Acts Among Girls
Participants at the Public Education Network’s annual conference agreed that, in their local communities, they were seeing parallel trends with those in the MetLife survey: girls were more likely to be involved in gangs than they were five years ago.

Officers in Buffalo agree with this national finding, reporting that girls tend to resort to physical violence more quickly and are more willing to carry weapons than they were five years ago. The officers attribute this change to peer pressure, which, they say, is a “great motivator” and creates a “need for girls to prove more.”

Feeling Safe at School
The experiences in the Mon Valley mirror the national picture: half of the students participating in the community conversation and all of the teachers reported that they usually or always feel safe at school.

Gang Activity
Students in Buffalo reported that a few well organized gangs in the city made other students feel like they needed to start or join a gang of their own for protection.

Prevalence of Weapons
Officers in Buffalo find that, instead of bringing weapons into the school building, students tend to leave weapons under bushes or other hidden places away from the school, intending to commit a violent act or defend themselves on the way home from school.
Student Assistance Program

The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania's Student Assistance Program is a systematic process using effective and accountable professional techniques to mobilize school resources to remove the barriers to learning. Teams of counselors, teachers, administrators, nurses, and liaisons with county agencies help assess what services students need and provide or connect students with those services.

Team members are formally trained by the state departments of education and health and public welfare. Parents are informed of problems affecting a student's school performance and involved in resolving problems.

For more information, see the state's Student Assistance Program Web site (www.sap.state.pa.us).

Action and Policy that Promotes School Safety

Local education funds are poised to broker connections and advocacy in their communities to promote school safety. The MetLife school safety conversations revealed several promising practices to address issues of safety and make our schools safer environments for students and teachers.

Paterson participants stressed the need for full implementation and enforcement of code of conduct policies that include rules and expectations for civil behavior to ultimately support learning.

Middle and high schools in the Mon Valley all have a Student Assistance Program.

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Code of Conduct Policies

The Code of Conduct adopted by the school board in Paterson, NJ, creates an imperative for civil behavior that supports learning. The Code includes rules and expectations of acceptable behavior, mutual respect, basic manners, and clear consequences for not meeting the expectations.

In their conversation, community participants in Paterson outlined ways to fully implement a Code of Conduct:

- The Board of Education should lead a campaign to make staff and community aware of the code
- All schools should follow a uniform Code. Parents and students should sign Code agreements at the start of each school year.
- Parents should be involved in the development of the Code, and local education stakeholders (community groups, social service agencies, churches) should know about the Code and be involved in helping promote the behaviors among students.
School resource officers in Buffalo are thought of as a positive violence prevention measure, as they are in schools to mentor and provide help to students rather than act as security guards. Community members in Buffalo reported that improved training for officers to help them become more proactive and visible in schools could help decrease incidents of violence.

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Participants in Lancaster and Paterson expressed the need for better cultural awareness and understanding between staff and students as a strategy for creating safer environments. Interestingly, students in Lancaster said that diversity in schools fosters a sense of tolerance and acceptance among all students.

In Lancaster, students and parents noted that school buildings should be more secure, with locked doors and controlled entry, so the school staff knows who enters the building. Some community residents, however, felt that a more open environment, where more community members are present in the school, would help improve student safety.

Next Steps for LEF Communities

Generally, the LEFs who participated in PEN's School Safety Community Conversation project will disseminate their findings of local community readiness and capacity to address health and social service needs and violence prevention among their community's students.

APPLE Corps in Atlanta, GA convened its community conversation by the end of February. The school district's superintendent participated, and the conversation focused on the local implications of the MetLife survey.

The Paterson Education Fund in Paterson, NJ will also work with the school board to develop an implementation plan for the board-approved Code of Conduct. The plan would include a district-led public awareness campaign and school visits by board members to explain the Code.

The Mon Valley Education Consortium in McKeesport, PA will also disseminate survey responses of teachers and students regarding perceptions of safety and awareness of safe school plans, helping the school district and community focus further conversations on school safety.

For More Information

On School Safety

Violence in America's Public Schools: Five Years Later. The Metropolitan Life Survey of the American Teacher, 1999. Metropolitan Life Insurance Company. Examines the issue of violence in public schools from the perspective of students, teachers, and law enforcement officials, and compares the findings with MetLife's 1993 study on the same
LEF Demographics

<table>
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<tr>
<th>LEF</th>
<th>Population of Students</th>
<th>Free- or Reduced-price Lunch</th>
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<tr>
<td>Buffalo, NY</td>
<td>143,823</td>
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<td>Atlanta, GA</td>
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<td>Mon Valley, PA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lancaster, PA</td>
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<td>43%</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The National Association of Student Assistance Professionals advocates for professionals and programs that promote student achievement; healthy, safe, and drug-free lifestyles; and strength-based approaches in working with youth. The Web site contains information on Student Assistance Programs. Web site: www.nasap.org

"We learned that community members think that if they are more involved with students and schools, they can help decrease drug and violence problems among students."  
Jackie Foust, Mon Valley Education Consortium
LEF Contacts

Contact the participating local education funds for more information on organizing a school safety conversation or their plans to address school safety issues in their communities.

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