



NJDOE News

For More Information Contact the Public Information Office:

Jon Zlock
Kathryn Forsyth, Director
609-292-1126

For Release: June 29, 2004

Reports of Violence Down in New Jersey Schools

- ▶ [Violence, Vandalism and Substance Abuse in New Jersey Public Schools 2002-2003](#)
- ▶ [Unsafe School Choice Option Policy](#)
 - [USCO Policy Provisions I and II Questions And Answers](#)
 - [Fact Sheet](#)

More than two thirds of the schools in New Jersey reported five or fewer incidents of violence, vandalism or substance abuse in 2002-2003, and more than one third of the schools reported no incidents at all, according to the [annual report on school violence](#) released today by the state Department of Education.

The report provides detailed data on a wide range of incidents, ranging from fighting, trespassing, theft and fireworks possession, to major behavioral problems such as assault, extortion and the possession of weapons and drugs at New Jersey's approximately 2,450 public and charter schools.

DOE is required to collect the information from schools through the Electronic Violence and Vandalism Reporting System (EVVRS) and present the report to the Education Committees of the Legislature.

The report also describes the many programs and initiatives that the DOE, the Attorney General's Office, other state agencies, education organizations and the districts and schools themselves have undertaken or plan to undertake to promote character education and foster safety within the schools.

"This report shows that the overwhelming majority of our schools are safe places where teachers can teach and children can learn," said Commissioner of Education Dr. William L. Librera.

Overall, the number of instances of violence declined by five percent and the number of incidents involving substance abuse decreased by one percent, while incidents reported under the vandalism category increased by one percent. The number of incidents involving weapons increased by nine percent (from 1,396 to 1,525), accounted for principally by increases in the number of incidents involving the possession of knives, air guns and imitation guns.

"New Jersey has aggressively pursued a variety of policy and program strategies to address the problem of disruption and violence in the schools since the beginning of the Safe Schools Initiative in 1994," said Commissioner Librera. "We work with the school districts to foster safety at all points of the continuum - from prevention through crisis response to recovery."

Recent initiatives have included new laws prohibiting harassment, intimidation and bullying in schools, requiring annual public hearings on school violence, requiring the annual public observance of School Violence Awareness Week and imposing penalties for the falsification of violence; a new DOE web site, "Keeping Our Kids Safe," which encourages districts to find diverse ways to create a safe environment for students at all times and consolidates in one place a wide variety of resources to help districts address violence; and amendments to the administrative code adopted by the State Board of Education that address school safety issues.

In addition, New Jersey has established new Core Curriculum Content Standards, focusing on bullying and violence prevention strategies, with a clear emphasis on character education; established the New Jersey Character Education Commission; opened the New Jersey Center for Character Education at Rutgers University; and continued the Intervention and Referral Services initiative, which provides technical support for the establishment of multi-disciplinary problem-solving teams in individual schools.

"We are also recognizing the benefits from numerous grant programs, conferences, seminars, publications and partnerships with institutions of higher education, including the Positive Student Discipline Reform Demonstration

Project with UMDNJ," said Commissioner Librera.

The federal *No Child Left Behind* act (NCLB) required DOE to adopt policies regarding the transfer of disciplinary records along with an [Unsafe School Choice Option \(USCO\) policy](#). Under USCO, all schools receiving NCLB funds must provide a within-district school choice option to victims of violent criminal offenses. DOE is also required to annually identify schools which meet the policy definition of "persistently dangerous"; parents of the children attending those schools must be offered a within-district school choice option, too.

The EVVRS data is used to determine which schools are in that category under the USCO policy. This year, ten schools (less than one-half of one percent of the schools in the state) met the criteria.

Five schools – Atlantic City High School, Camden High School, East Camden Middle School, Bonsall Elementary School in Camden and Patrick F. Healy Middle School in East Orange – made the list for a second year in a row.

Two schools identified last year, Herma Simmons Elementary School in Clayton and Lakeside Middle School in Millville, saw the number of instances decrease below the criteria established in the USCO policy and were dropped from the list.

Five schools met the definition for the first time. They are: South Camden Alternative School in Camden, Lincoln High School in Jersey City, Samuel L. Berliner School in Newark, Grace A. Dunn Middle School in Trenton and D'Ippolito Intermediate School in Vineland. Two of these schools, South Camden and Berliner, have very small student bodies composed primarily of students with disabilities.

Under NCLB, the parents of all the students in the ten schools meeting the criteria must be informed of the designation within 15 days and offered the option to transfer their children to another school within the district.

In addition, officials in each school district must develop and submit to DOE a corrective action plan for its school or schools meeting the criteria, describing methods to be used to reduce the number of instances of violence. The DOE will provide guidance and support to the districts for the implementation of these plans.