

Labor and Management Work Together in Connecticut's Vocational Technical Schools to Create a Safer School Environment

By
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The U.S. Department of Labor announced recently in its report, *Working Together for Public Service*, that a study of about fifty public workplaces found that labor-management cooperation and employee participation lead to dramatic improvements in quality, costs and delivery of service. The Task Force, comprised of fourteen elected officials, labor leaders and academics, was unanimous in the view that public workplaces must change from traditional ways of doing business and move toward workplace cooperation, participation, and quality improvement. The Task Force believes that the public sector offers significant opportunity for employee participation and labor-management cooperation. The Report recommends that "case studies should be produced for others to analyze and learn from and to serve as objective resources of non-advocacy information." Edward Cohen-Rosenthal and Cynthia E. Burton write in the Second Edition, Revised, of *Mutual Gains: A Guide to Union-Management Cooperation*, that the basic notion that unions and employers should seek out their common interests and build on them has not changed, but that today, there is not any real choice for either party.

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The Connecticut Department of Education, Regional Vocational-Technical School System and the Connecticut State Vocational Federation of Teachers' recent experience in creating a labor-management partnership that works is particularly timely in light of current recognition of the need for and potential benefits of labor-management cooperation. Furthermore, the project addresses an issue that is by no means unique to Connecticut.

Two important news announcements appeared in October 1995. One was the Connecticut Department of Education's bulletin announcing that Connecticut's Regional Vocational-Technical School System (RVTSS) and the State Vocational Federation of Teachers (SVFT) had secured a \$100,000 federal grant from the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service (FMCS) to promote a safe and supportive learning environment in the state's seventeen school RVTSS. Key objectives are to increase conflict management skills; increase classroom management skills, and the time spent on teaching rather

than discipline; decrease the number of student disciplinary incidents; and to improve the school environment. The program, developed by the Management Team of the RVTSS, the Department's Bureau of Human Resources and the SVFT, includes creation of a conflict management program and safety training for teachers, counselors and staff administrators, together with a strong evaluation component. State Education Commissioner Theodore S. Sergi was quoted as saying that safe, secure schools are a top priority and that the thoughtful planning that went into the development of the program demonstrates that management and the leadership of the SVFT share a strong commitment to that priority. He added that the federal funds will make a difference, and that the work carried out under the grant will provide a model for other school districts to follow. SVFT President Aaron Silvia also expressed strong support for the program. He said, "One of the great benefits of this effort will be that teachers who have been trained in conflict management and who use these skills every day in the schools will serve as role models for students. We will be teaching by example that conflict can be resolved constructively. And we will be creating a safe schools environment for everyone." The other news bulletin was a notice in *Public Service Reporter*, a publication of the Federation of Public Employees, AFT, AFL-CIO, that explained that the FPE affiliate and the state plan to use their grant to improve teacher and student productivity by reducing violence in the schools and teaching conflict management skills.

The public announcements marked the beginning of a labor management partnership to address a vital issue in the RVTSS, but the true beginning occurred much earlier. Before the cooperative venture could start, someone needed to come up with the idea and the parties, including top management, had to be convinced of its value and feasibility. Clearly, total "buy in" by management and the union would be needed for success. A Grant Planning Team had to be formed to develop a mission statement and goals; a plan for accomplishing the goals; the strategies and resources that would be needed for success; and how results would be evaluated. After the grant was awarded, an implementation team and Project Manager were essential to coordinate and facilitate implementation. Happily, the project is now off and running.

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Labor-management cooperation is the primary focus of this study of the Connecticut Department of Education's effort to create a safer environment in its Vocational-Technical Schools. Significant issues to address are:

- The evolution of the labor-management relationship in the RVTSS;
- The genesis of the cooperative effort to promote conflict resolution and improve safety in the RVTSS;
- The planning process and the outcome;

- Implementing the plan;
- Evaluating the results;
- Essential ingredients for a labor-management partnership;
- What can be learned from this experience, given the uniqueness of each situation.

Labor-Management Relations

The Regional Vocational-Technical School System, which is operated under the jurisdiction of the Connecticut State Board of Education and as a part of the State Department of Education, serves approximately 10,000 full-time high school students and 7,000 mostly part-time adult students at seventeen schools and three satellites in urban, suburban, and rural sites throughout the state. RVTSS employs 1,400 teachers, administrators, and support staff.

Connecticut's state employees gained collective bargaining rights in 1975 and most first contracts began in July 1977. The Vocational-Technical School teachers in the RVTSS are in the Vocational-Technical Instructors Unit represented by the State Vocational Federation of Teachers, affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO. Athletic Coordinators and Coaches are also in the bargaining unit. Administrators and non-instructional staff, such as cafeteria workers and custodians in other bargaining units, have been included in workshops that are part of the cooperative effort, but the SVFT is the partner in the joint venture. Until 1987 labor relations between the RVTSS and the SVFT were characterized by the customary adversarial positions during negotiations and business-like but not especially collaborative relations during the periods of contract administration. According to David Howard of the SVFT, a new slate of union officers with a pro-active approach to labor relations came into office in 1987. Their approach has been to try to understand issues from the standpoint of labor, management and the individual grievant. This approach has been successful with the cooperation of top management in the RVTSS, as well as Richard Sullivan, a labor relations specialist. The bargaining unit has gone from 311 grievances in 1987 to thirty to forty during the past two years as a result of a labor relations style that fosters trust and a belief on the part of management that it is important to understand the union's position. The labor contract in effect between the parties is from 1993 to 1999.

Genesis of Labor-Management Cooperation

The U.S. Department of Labor's Report, *Working Together for Public Service*, speaks of the roles of the human resource office, human resource professionals and labor relations professionals changing and becoming more facilitative and less regulatory with the adoption of cooperative programs. In this case, however, Human Resources acted as a catalyst in the adoption of a cooperative program and continues to play an active role in implementing the program. Human Resources is encouraging rather than merely adapting to change.

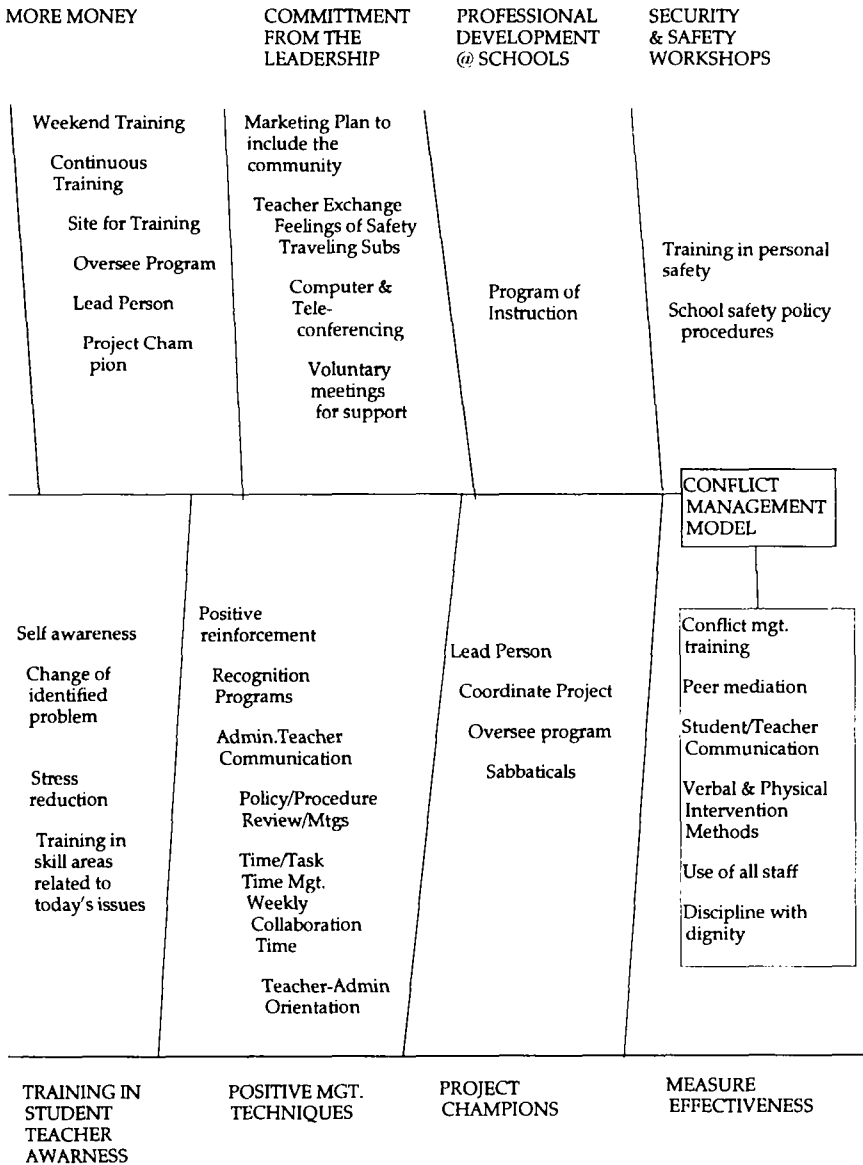
The increasing conflict and violence in our society have been reflected in the RVTSS's student population in Connecticut. The problems are complex and have resulted in a loss of both student and teacher productivity, although there are differences among the schools. Dealing with conflict issues has caused teacher and student stress. During the 1993-94 school year, the number of referrals to the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) for job related stress issues for teachers more than doubled. Teachers cared about what was happening and wanted to do something about it. During the time when these concerns were expressed, Richard Wilber, Chief of the Bureau of Human Resources in the State Department of Education, attended a bi-annual FMCS Labor Management Conference in Washington, D.C. and learned about the labor-management grants established by the Labor-Management Cooperation Act of 1978 through which funding is provided to encourage innovative approaches to collaborative labor-management relations and problem-solving. The grants have helped support many cooperative projects throughout the United States. Why couldn't the SVFT and the RVTSS try to solve their problem through a cooperative labor-management effort and enlist the aid of the FMCS in doing so? Upon his return from the conference, Dick Wilber discussed this possibility with Ron Tabellione, former President of the SVFT, David Howard, Executive Building Representative (Chief Steward) and the Superintendent's office, who were also familiar with the FMCS program. They, too, were interested in collaborating to pursue an FMCS grant.

The Planning Process and the Outcome

Richard Wilber convinced Dr. Juan Lopez, the School Superintendent, of the value of the proposed labor-management effort and overcame his fears of overcommitment with limited resources. Dr. Lopez approved the formation of a Grant Planning Team, authorizing release time and substitute coverage for the team members who would need to be replaced during the development process. Richard Wilber, with full support of the superinten-

dent's office, addressed the union leadership at an Executive Council meeting, inviting their support and commitment as well as providing assurance of the agency's commitment.

Figure 1: Cause-and-Effect Diagram



The original planning team included the union representative, a teacher, a school psychologist and three members from the Bureau of Human Resources. The superintendent's office was briefed periodically on the progress of the team. Several members were experts in professional development or had participated in conflict management and violence prevention programs during the past year. The team met for three hours a week from October 1994 through April 1995. They had the advantage of being able to use resources in the Department of Education to assist in grant writing and for technical assistance with surveys. Using the Total Quality problem solving process, they ultimately developed a cause-and-effect diagram (Figure 1) to represent their consensus in identifying the goals for the Conflict Management Model as the way to address the crisis facing their schools.

The Grant Planning Team then formulated goals and objectives (Figure 2).

To achieve the team's goals and objectives, a model program was developed consisting of conflict management training, classroom management, safety training, an optional Wilderness School Program, and skill enhancing follow-up programs. Important features are the plans to hold initial meetings at each participating school to discuss the program's goals and objectives as well as its components; one-day training sessions to provide concrete conflict management and personal safety skills; and school-based follow-up sessions to reinforce skills and address specific needs of schools. The team was cognizant of the importance of building support and ensuring participation at the school level. The plan includes developing individual milestone charts for each of the seventeen schools for institutionalizing change.

Figure 2

GOAL STATEMENT

1. To improve teacher and student productivity;
2. To ensure the safety and security of students; and
3. To improve school environment and morale.

OBJECTIVES

1. To strengthen communication, conflict management and problem-solving skills of teachers, counselors and administrators evidenced by
 - an increase in time spent on teaching rather than on discipline;
 - a decrease in reportable disciplinary incidents between teacher and students.
 2. To increase positive stress and anger management skills for teachers, counselors and administrators as measured by
 - a decrease in absenteeism, Employee Assistance Program (EAP) referrals;
 - an increase in time spent on teaching rather than on discipline.
 3. To improve school environment and morale as evidenced by
 - a decrease in reportable disciplinary actions (suspensions, etc.);
 - an increase in reported personal safety
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One of the most important features of the plan is the evaluation component. The bottom line is whether the cooperative effort succeeds in accomplishing its goals and objectives. The goals are to increase productivity for staff and students and to produce a positive culture change. The three principal objectives are:

1. To strengthen communication, conflict management and problem solving skills of teachers, administration and students.
2. To increase stress and anger management skills for students, teachers and administrators.
3. To improve the school environment and morale.

Outcomes for each objective will be measured and evaluated.

The measures for Number 1 are the increase of time spent on teaching rather than discipline and the decrease in the number of reportable incidents between teachers and students. Teachers will be surveyed prior to the start of the program and upon completion of the grant on the amount of time they spend on disciplinary matters and instruction. Data is compiled at each school on the number of disciplinary incidents. This data will be used as a starting point. Disciplinary data will continue to be collected over the grant period and compared to the pre-grant start data.

Objective Number 2 will be evaluated using two measures. One is a comparison of absenteeism and EAP referrals before the start of the program, at mid-point and at the program's end. The other is to analyze the results of the survey referred to above questioning teachers on the amount of time they spend on instruction compared with disciplinary matters.

Objective Number 3 will be evaluated by a review of the disciplinary incidents data referred to above and also through surveys of students at the beginning and end of the grant period about their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors regarding violence v. non-violence, aggression, conflict resolution skills, cultural differences, communication, problem solving, personal safety, gang involvement and substance abuse.

Despite initial encouragement, there was no certainty that the plan would be accepted by top management. The union feared that the Superintendent and his staff would perceive the proposal as a union project, but Dick Wilber was successful in reassuring him that it was truly a joint endeavor. Another concern, particularly on the part of the union, was of history repeating itself. Many members knew that in the past, pilot projects had often died and been memorialized on a shelf. The union leadership knew that it had to avoid use of the term "pilot project" and concentrate on what

really mattered, i.e., changing the culture of the RVTSS and institutionalizing conflict management skills.

The plan for the Labor Management Conflict Management project, including a proposed budget, was submitted to the FMCS in the form of an Application for Federal Assistance on May 11, 1995. It included a letter of support from Ron Tabellione, President of SVFT, giving assurance that the proposal did not, to his knowledge, conflict with the collective bargaining agreement in effect between the SVFT and the State Board of Education. All of the Grant Planning Team members wrote letters confirming their support, participation and future commitment.

Implementing the Plan

FMCS's announcement in October 1995 that the Connecticut Department of Education/American Federation of Teachers had been awarded \$100,000 to improve teacher and student productivity among the state's seventeen Regional Vocational-Technical Schools by improving conflict management skills and reducing discipline problems marked the next step in an exciting project. Connecticut's application was the only one approved for a public school system, one of two approved for public education, and one of five in the public sector. A total of eighteen grants are listed in FMCS's Fiscal Year 1995 Funding Summary. Reportedly, two of the reasons Connecticut's plan was favorably received: its focus on measuring outcomes and the national significance of dealing with conflict and violence in the schools.

The FMCS grant provides funding for eighteen months of what is now envisioned to be a three year project. If additional federal funds are not available, the participants hope to obtain state funds. In fact, the Department of Education has already committed \$26,000 for the first year of the program.

After the grant was awarded, the Grant Planning Team re-grouped to include Joan Briggaman, Dave Howard, Marilyn Quinn, Aaron Silvia, Drew Soltys, Richard Wilber, and Gina Zmuda. Richard Wilber's job demands necessitated his moving more into the background, and he assigned Marilyn Quinn, Director of Staff Development for the Department of Education, to the project. She had been an active member of the Grant Planning Team. Just before winning the award, the team had asked the Superintendent to assign a person from his office to be involved in the project. This facilitated communication and helped to ensure the needed "buy in." It has also had the beneficial result of increasing the Superintendent's confidence in Human Resources' new role. Joan Briggaman, the Assistant Superintendent for Instruction and Professional Development, and Drew Soltys, the Consultant for Professional Development, were assigned to the team. Dr. Briggaman's

willingness to participate as a team member is evidence of her personal commitment and desire that the project succeed.

Dave Howard of the SVFT says that 80 percent planning and 20 percent implementation is characteristic of most successful programs. The RVTSS/SVFT is no exception. No amount of planning is ever enough, however. Once the grant was received, it was necessary to hire a project manager and pay her without being bogged down by government procedures. The problem was dealt with by using the SVFT's accounting system with appropriate labor and management co-signers. Mary Allen, the new project Manager, began work and was able, among other things, to change the dynamics of the committee. Seemingly minor details like the controls that are needed for joint accountability had to be worked out. Communication with the project manager by the two co-chairs was a new experience. Different management styles had to be reconciled. Controversy arose over whether the joint committee had a final say in everything or whether management retained some exclusive rights. Key players in ameliorating the situation were Mary Allen, who dealt with the committee's feeling of disempowerment; Dave Howard, who saw the big picture and had a good relationship with Human Resources; and Human Resources, which acted as a balance in this incident. No one really dug in their heels about the issue. Most decisions are made by consensus and the committee tends to defer to Joan Briggaman, the Assistant Superintendent, on implementation issues because of her knowledge of the system and persuasive reasons. Fortunately, the trusting relationship made it possible to overcome most of these problems, but it would have been preferable to have dealt with these issues in advance.

The implementation team polled each school about needs and developed seventeen grant presentations pertinent to each facility. The training for fiscal year 1996 consists of 50 minute kick-off meetings, three half-days to build conflict management skills, and one full day to build mediation skills. The format is "hands on" and practical, using small groups. The team visited all of the school presentations, observed how participants worked together, and encouraged positive interaction. As could be expected, minor problems arose. For example, the presentations were scheduled from 1:00 pm to 4:00 pm and the school day ends at 3:00 pm according to the union contract. Dave Howard urged members to stay, but he was challenged by many teachers. At one of the schools, Dave dealt with the immediate objection by trying to include the objector in the program, but a more comprehensive solution is needed. The Department is able to give professional development credit to teachers who need it for staying the extra hour, but not all teachers are at this level so the team is working on another solution.

The implementation has learned by doing. The team found that some teachers were resistant to the new approach and believe that discipline is the

job of the vice principals (RVTSS assistant directors). A review of suspension rates revealed a wide variation among schools, for example, the school in Bridgeport has particularly low numbers. Further study showed that this school has a unique culture that took a long time to build. It is characterized by the use of conflict management skills; a team approach to discipline by teachers and administrators who saw it as an opportunity to build relationships with students; a partnership with police, social agencies, and parents; a charismatic principal who gets to know each student as he/she enters; and, as a consequence, the ability to be selective about admissions because of the long-term reputation of the school.

Bridgeport's experience, together with recommendations of the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE), convinced the implementation team that reinforcing needed skills and building system-wide supports for culture change would really require more than eighteen months. NASBE recommends in its October 1994 report, *Schools Without Fear*, that boards of education should develop and incorporate plans for long-term strategies that promote safe and supportive school environments. These include exploring ways to collaborate with other stakeholders, developing comprehensive plans on the school level, and educating students and teachers.

As soon as the team recognized that it was going to take more time to incorporate a working knowledge of conflict management and problem-solving skills into the everyday routines of the schools, it developed a long-term vision to bring about the culture change:

- To increase staff awareness and skills;
- To reinforce staff skills and train students;
- To reinforce skills and build system-wide supports for culture change.

To further their efforts, the RVTSS has committed, over the long-term, to institutionalize this program for students in its Life Skills Curriculum. The Superintendent has asked the team to develop a 15-hour conflict management training program for all RVTSS students. Developing the conflict management course will provide Human Resources with a unique opportunity to work directly with teachers to improve the school environment and morale. Another idea under consideration is to help individual schools develop action plans for collaborating with other stakeholders, including parents and community organizations, to promote safe and supportive learning environments.

In the public sector, changes in leadership, especially on the management side, have historically precipitated the death knell for cooperative efforts that have not become institutionalized. In this case there was a union

election after the grant had been awarded and a President was elected on a more traditional labor-management platform. Fears that support for the project would be affected negatively by the new leadership were unfounded. The SVFT and Human Resources wisely invited the new President to contribute to a press release and he graciously accepted. In fact, he is a supporter of the cooperative effort and does the financial work for the project.

Evaluation of Results

The first Quarterly Report filed with the FMCS in February 1996 reported that all pre-program information would be gathered. This included teacher surveys on staff morale and time spent on teaching versus time spent on disciplinary matters; absenteeism and disciplinary action report statistics from the 1994-1995 school year; the *Pride Survey*, and EAP referral statistics for school year 1994-1995.

A second report dated April 15, 1996, stated that the training had been received very well. The key to success has been listening to the schools and trying to individualize training to meet each school's different needs. Schools have far less ownership of their training when it is handed down to them from a central authority.

A third report dated July 9, 1996, indicated that all seventeen vocational-technical schools completed three half-days and one full-day of conflict management and mediation training. The team recognized fully that the task of changing cultures is slow, but despite this, reported some favorable anecdotal feedback. Comments from participants in these workshops was largely positive, and several schools reported that staff members are trying to use some of the skills in their schools. The evaluation component built into the plan is very much a part of the implementation process.

Essential Ingredients for a Labor-Management Partnership

"The basis for any union-management cooperation is simply *respect* between the two parties. Cooperation then engages the principal parties in their common struggle for significant betterment." Respect clearly exists between the RVTSS and the SVTSS. It is interesting to note that labor and management in the Connecticut Department of Education followed many of the steps recommended by Cohen-Rosenthal and Burton to get started and design and plan an effective cooperative program. The U.S. Department of Labor's Report, *Working Together for Public Service*, also discusses key ingredients needed to begin and sustain cooperative relationships. Present in this case

are a favorable relations climate in the organization; top leadership support; commitment to real and responsible joint decision-making; openness to new approaches; a tension-producing event - increasing conflict and violence in the schools — that the parties use to build an effective approach to joint problem-solving; trust; and recognition that the success of the program will depend a great extent upon its acceptance by the front line personnel. Intergovernmental relations are also a positive element. Had it not been for the encouragement and grant from the FMCS, the Vocational Technical School project might not have gotten off the ground. In this particular case two other factors are important. One is the nature of the work group. "While all public employees show a high desire for input into service and workplace issues, teachers show the highest desire." In addition, both labor and management stand to win if conflicts can be reduced and the schools made safer. This is different from a situation where labor may fear that staff reductions will result if work processes and productivity are improved.

Conclusion

The Connecticut Department of Education, Regional Vocation-Technical School System and the Connecticut State Vocational Federation of Teachers are creating a labor-management partnership that works. Problems have arisen and will continue to, but the underlying commitment and motivation has enabled the participants to address them constructively. Even though each situation is unique, there is much that can be learned from this experience about what went right, what went wrong, and why. It is too soon for final results to be available about changing the organizational culture of the school system and creating a safer environment, but the collaborative effort between labor and management is alive and well and the participants are moving forward vigorously in carrying out their plan. For Human Resources, a side benefit is the opportunity to play a positive role in the RVTSS, improve relationships with the rest of the department, and continue to enjoy a constructive relationship with labor.

Notes

¹ *Report of the U.S. Secretary of Labor's Task Force on Excellence in State and Local Government Through Labor Management Cooperation* (May, 1996). U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington DC.

² *Ibid.*, p. 103.

³ Cohen-Rosenthal, Edward and Burton, Cynthia (1993). *Mutual Gains: A Guide to Union-Management Cooperation*. Ithaca, New York: ILR Press.

⁴ *Public Service Reporter*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (October/November 1995), p. 2

⁵ *Op. Cit.*, p. 78

⁶ The labor-management committee has reassessed its staffing needs and no longer employs a manager. The Capital Region Education Council and Marilyn Quinn are performing staff functions presently required.

⁷ National Association of State Boards of Education, *Schools Without Fear*, Alexandria, Virginia, October 1994.

⁸ A national survey for grades 9-12 to capture data about substance abuse, guns and violence and information about school environments.

⁹ Cohen-Rosenthal and Burton, *Op. cit.*, pp. 21-22.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 169-197.

¹¹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 69-79.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 51.

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