



NJDOE News

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For Release: August 29, 2007

DOE Releases Report to the Legislature on Violence and Vandalism at New Jersey Schools

Seventy percent of New Jersey schools reported five or fewer instances of violence, vandalism and substance abuse during the 2005-06 school year, and 37 percent (916 schools) reported no instances at all, according to the annual report to the Legislature on school violence released today by the New Jersey Department of Education.

In addition, in accordance with the federal *No Child Left Behind Act*, department officials announced that no New Jersey schools have been identified as meeting the state's policy definition of "persistently dangerous schools" (PDS).

The two schools identified as PDS last year – Trenton Central High School and East Side High School in Paterson – reported fewer instances of violence and vandalism in 2005-06 and have been removed from the PDS list. The third school cited in the 2006 news release, Wilbur Watts Intermediate School in Burlington City, was removed from the list last fall after the school appealed the designation and DOE reviewed the data reported in 2003-04.

The Annual Report to the Education Committees of the Senate and General Assembly on Violence, Vandalism and Substance Abuse in New Jersey Public Schools, which is required by statute, is compiled from data that is self-reported to DOE by schools through the Electronic Violence and Vandalism Reporting System (EVVRS).

The report provides detailed information on a wide range of incidents, from fighting, trespassing, theft and fireworks possession to major behavioral problems such as assault, extortion and possession of firearms and drugs at New Jersey's approximately 2,400 public schools.

It also includes a complete description of the department's numerous initiatives and ongoing programmatic responses to the problem of violence, vandalism and substance abuse in schools.

A total of 18,796 incidents were reported statewide in 2005-06, an increase of two percent (643 incidents) over the number reported in 2004-05. The increase was driven mainly by a two percent increase in reported incidents of violence and a nine percent increase in reported incidents of vandalism. The total number of weapons offenses and incidents of substance abuse, possession and distribution declined by three percent.

Notable changes in the violence category include a 24 percent increase in reported incidents of harassment, intimidation and bullying and an 11 percent increase in reported threats.

"In recent years, there has been a greater public focus on matters like harassment, bullying and threats by students," said Commissioner of Education Lucille E. Davy. "The department has developed a model policy on this issue, and we have provided training for teachers throughout the state. The increase in the number of reported incidents could be the result of the heightened awareness of the serious nature of this kind of misconduct."

Within the vandalism category, there was a 14 percent increase in theft and a five percent increase in damage to property. While there was a small increase in firearms possession (from seven to twelve incidents), incidents of other weapons possession declined by eight percent and incidents of possession of substances such as alcohol and drugs declined by eleven percent.

Nine percent of schools reported 25 or more incidents of violence and vandalism. More than half of all incidents (56 percent) occurred in high schools and 31 percent occurred in middle schools, findings consistent with previous years.

"Once again, this report shows that although incidents of violence occasionally occur in schools, they are infrequent," Commissioner Davy said. "School safety has been a major focus for the Governor, the department and the districts. Those efforts, combined with more accurate and consistent self-reporting practices by the districts, are reflected in the report we are releasing today.

"But the prevention of violence in our schools is something that requires constant vigilance and attention," the Commissioner said. "Each district's code of student conduct, school safety and V&V reporting practices are evaluated under NJ QSAC, the department's new monitoring system. We continue to assist districts improve the way they identify and report incidents. We are also providing professional development and technical assistance and training, promoting pilot projects and funneling federal Title IV funds to help

districts implement research-based prevention and intervention programs.”

Last year’s report showed a 21 percent decrease in incidents of violence and an 18 percent decrease in the number of incidents of vandalism. This year’s report includes an update on the review undertaken by the department into the data submitted last year by 19 districts that reported either a decline of at least 100 incidents of violence over a three-year period (between 2002-03 and 2004-05) or at least 50 incidents of violence in 2002-03 and a decline of at least 50 percent over the same period.

DOE officials asked the districts to confirm the data that they reported, make sure the categorization of incidents was correct, review all incident reports, determine that reporting requirements were followed district-wide and provide an explanation for the decline. Department staff conducted site visits at several districts.

Two of the districts identified errors in the data they submitted. Nine districts determined that staff required better training in the definitions of the types of misconduct that must be reported.

Officials in nine other districts reported that during the prior year, they had taken different kinds of administrative actions to reduce the level of violence in their schools and ensure the accurate reporting of incidents. These steps included: the creation of administrative teams focused on violence prevention; the use of technology, including cameras, on school buses and in school buildings; increasing security; providing teacher training on the early recognition of troubled students; and modifying lunchroom and class change procedures.

Six districts reported enhancing relationships between the school community and the larger community by methods such as: the creation of student-parent advisory councils; working more closely with law enforcement; fostering better communication among parents, students and teachers; and establishing better relationships with local, county, state and federal agencies concerned with juvenile justice issues. One district established a multi-cultural task force to assist the schools in calming students so that acts of violence that occurred in the community would not continue in the schools.

Five districts with the highest percentage of declines received site visits by department staff. Using a protocol developed specifically to determine the accuracy of reporting on the EVVRS, staff members reviewed local records of disciplinary action taken in response to student misconduct.

Based on the results of the justification reviews and the protocol reviews, the department determined that the reports from the Camden and Jersey City school districts require additional review based upon the site visits undertaken by the department. Liberty Academy Charter School in Jersey City and the Hillside school district also require further review based on their limited response to the department’s request.

[The report is available here.](#)

[District totals are available here.](#)

[A list of the 19 districts reviewed by the department last year and their responses is available here.](#)