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Testimony on

School Violence

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to the

Early Childhood, Youth and Families Subcommittee
of the Education and Workforce Committee

United States House of Representatives

May 18, 1999

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Hearing on School Violence

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It is with a history of more than twenty years of working in schools, community, and forensic settings that I come to you with concern in my heart today regarding the violence we are living within our nation's schools. Those of us who work in and send our children to school everyday have experienced the feeling being exposed and vulnerable, even if fleeting, to the dangers which could be prevalent in the buildings we would like to view as safe. Several students, teachers, and parents alike, have come to me and asked if I was just a little bit scared, because they were. My own son pleaded with his father and me not to send him to school because he was afraid for his life.

People in the schools, where I work on a daily basis, have a heightened sense of alertness even though business appears to be going on as usual. We all realize that the tragedies in schools over the past few years, and most recently in Littleton, Colorado, could have just as easily occurred in Baltimore. We have certainly seen enough instances of students who empathize with the choices of the two misguided Columbine High School teens who killed their classmates and themselves. Students, who previously may not have chosen such a final course of action, now seem to have been given permission to express their personal pain and confusion via planning to commit deadly actions in order to draw attention to their suffering. These students are often wound up so tightly that the escape from their distress may not be explainable in rational terms.

Every middle school and high school student was also an elementary school student

at one time. Patterns of behavior and ways of reacting to disappointment, whether positive or negative, appropriate or inappropriate, began forming during the early years of school. I see these innocent children practically every day. Unfortunately, some of them already have developed patterns of behavior which cause their peers to shun them and to choose to play with other students. However, some play with these troubled children because they are afraid not to. These same innocent children with their limited life experience make choices reflecting the developing anger and frustration they feel. Sometimes they choose to talk about it and sometimes not. Sometimes they do not possess the language skills needed to put into words the turmoil they feel inside. Regardless, it should always be remembered that young innocent lives are completely dependent on others to provide for their needs. They may feel endangered in some way if they share with someone else what they are really going through, the pain and distress they truly feel inside, and what may be contributing to these unpleasant feelings.

All children have to attend or participate in some form of school. It's the law. All children who attend a public institution of learning have varying values, goals, and aptitudes for realizing their ideas of success on a daily basis. Whereas children may be more inclined to attempt to please their teachers (and other important adults) during their early school years, when they continue to miss the mark academically and socially, they tell themselves that things like grades and friends are not that important. They tell themselves that they would really rather be alone and not go on the playground to play. They teach themselves to become proficient seeing fault in others but not in themselves. It becomes

easy to criticize their lessons or teachers, projecting blame outside of themselves. It is not difficult to imagine the various discipline problems which often follow as next steps in the sequence, which continues to reinforce a pattern of behavior which seems inconsistent with making good choices.

One student who comes to mind is a young third grader, who has reportedly made several threats to his teacher, and at least on one occasion physically aggressed against her. The teacher is a young first year teacher with excellent skills and a caring attitude. She has bent over backwards by all accords to be fair to this student. However, the more she attempted to help him, the more he seemed to misread her kindness for permission to lash out at her. He blamed her for his academic frustrations and his lack of popularity with other students in class. He often lied to the teacher and feigned offense when confronted with the differing accounts of others in the class compared to his version of what happened.

It did not help that this child's home environment was chaotic, and the children in the home were more or less responsible for themselves. Often, it was an older sibling of this third grader, acting as a parent, who decided whether his brother came to school or not. Unfortunately, there were no apparent consequences at home for missing school and the older parental sibling, himself, needed the assistance of special education services due to a learning disability and problems with attention. The tragedy of this scenario is the escapism both students used to avoid unpleasantness at school, one through his aggressive actions removed himself from the school environment, and the other through choosing

school absenteeism removed himself from an overwhelming situation. Other students leave the classroom, walk the halls, openly refuse to return to class, and defiantly tell adults what they will and won't do. Sometimes the teachers feel a sense of helplessness, especially when they are told that it is their responsibility to keep students in the classroom being model students while teaching model lessons with little to no inner controls. Teachers are clearly not able to accomplish this often superhuman feat on their own, rather there needs to be a school wide effort that promotes a safe disciplined learning environment.

Curtis Bay Elementary School in Baltimore, Maryland, is a school of about 500 prekindergarten through sixth grade students and a mostly female staff. This school is led by two women who share a vision; the principal and administrative assistant work together and with the staff to bring about a positive atmosphere in the building and employ a problem solving paradigm to facilitate much needed changes. There are various schools which use social skill development or individualized consultation, but Curtis Bay has chosen the Project ACHIEVE model of reform. This model works best when approached as a building wide behavior management system replete with appropriate incentives and consequences for the choices made. It is a research-based program with built in accountability and ongoing data collection efforts to help the teachers and administrators make adjustments which fit the model to the building. At Curtis Bay, this program has interwoven the various components of safety issues, development of social skills and problem solving skills to facilitate students in making good choices, increased academic availability for all students, continuing staff development via seminars and collaborative

consultative methods, and parental involvement. During our first year of introduction and implementation of this program at Curtis Bay we continue to look for ways to improve our efforts. We meet weekly in problem solving sessions and are looking to implement additional conflict resolution and peer mediation pieces for special circumstances which may come up from time to time. We are limited in our training efforts with the students and staff only by the lack of funds. An example of this is our desire to provide peer mediation and conflict resolution training for students prior to the beginning of the 1999-2000 school year, along with additional staff to supervise on the playground. However, these plans may be in jeopardy due to fund limitations.

I want to emphasize that the behavior of students is becoming more alarming. They are making choices with a finality they clearly do not fully comprehend. We have to do something to help them appreciate the fact that they do have alternatives and in the process help them to foster hope for their own futures. Talking about it is fine. Doing something about it is better. The future of our children and our nation may very well depend on how we respond to and handle the crisis in our schools now.