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## NJDOE News

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### **Violence and Vandalism Decreases Reported at New Jersey Schools**

More than 70 percent of New Jersey school districts reported five or fewer instances of violence, vandalism and substance abuse in 2004-05, and 38 percent of the districts reported no instances at all, according to the annual report on school violence released today by the New Jersey Department of Education.

In accordance with the federal *No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)*, department officials also announced that three schools - Trenton Central High School, East Side High School in Paterson and Wilbur Watts Intermediate School in Burlington City - have been identified as meeting the state's policy definition of "persistently dangerous." Parents of the students attending these schools will be offered an in-district school choice option where available.

The annual report, which is required by statute, is compiled from data that DOE collects from schools through the Electronic Violence and Vandalism Reporting System (EVVRS) and is submitted to the education committees of the Legislature.

It 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 and charter schools.

"As we've seen in past years, the vast majority of New Jersey's schools are safe places for students and teachers, and very few schools have persistent problems," said acting Commissioner of Education Lucille E. Davy. "In addition, DOE's ongoing collection and use of this data allows us to target changing areas of need. We can then adapt our regulations and policies and create programs to address emerging problems."

The total number of incidents reported by school districts in 2004-05 was 18,409, down 1,798 (nine percent) from the 20,207 incidents reported in the 03-04 school year and down 3,777 (17 percent) from the 22,186 reported during the 02-03 school year.

The decrease is reflected primarily in declines in two of the major reporting categories: violence and vandalism.

Instances of violence declined by 21 percent, driven mainly by a 37 percent reduction in the number of simple assaults, an 18 percent reduction in the number of fights and a 35 percent decline in the number of threats reported.

Overall, the number of vandalism incidents decreased by 18 percent. This included a 19 percent decrease in the number of incidents that involved damage to property and a 13 percent decline in the number of thefts reported. The number of weapons possession incidents was down four percent and number of substance abuse incidents declined by one percent.

Acting Commissioner Davy said that while the report reflects positive trends, direct year-to-year statistical comparisons must be interpreted with caution.

"Thanks to the support of the Legislature and federal funding, DOE has been able to institute many programs to reduce the incidence of violence and vandalism in schools. We have also worked hard over the past few years to bring consistency to the self-reporting process that is the basis for this report," she said. "But the decline in the number of instances during this three-year period is unusual and we feel we have to dig a little deeper in order to make valid conclusions."

In reviewing the data, DOE officials noted that the decline of nearly 4,000 incidents in the major category of violence between 2002-03 and 2004-05 was concentrated in 51 districts. Eight districts reporting at least 100 fewer incidents of violence were associated with 58 percent of the net decline in overall school violence over the three-year period.

DOE surveyed a subgroup of 19 of the 51 districts to ascertain the factors that contributed to sizable declines in

the number of incidents, including successful strategies the districts may have implemented over the past few years to reduce violence and vandalism.

The districts have also been asked to confirm that the EVVRS reports and categorizations of incidents are consistent with their written records, ensure that all incidents were entered into the system and interview appropriate staff to determine whether the proper reporting requirements were met.

The department is currently reviewing this information. Site visits and other verification activities will be conducted once the new school year begins so that DOE can assess the need for direct technical assistance in incident reporting, the general need for further clarification on reporting criteria and disseminate information on the strategies and actions taken by the various districts that influenced the decline. A list of the 19 districts involved in the study is attached to this news release.

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

"Due to the Safe Schools Initiative and the cooperation of many different agencies, we are able to work with the school districts at all levels, from prevention, through crises response to recovery," Acting Commissioner Davy said.

Initiatives undertaken in recent years have included:

- Resource manuals and guidance documents for the creation of school safety plans, accessing intervention and referral services and providing community service programs for expelled and suspended students.
- Numerous new violence-related regulatory changes, including those relating to codes of student conduct, suspensions, expulsions, conduct away from school grounds, staff responsibilities, attendance, intimidation, harassment, bullying and student records and confidentiality.
- New requirements for staff training in school safety and security.
- Revised model policies prohibiting harassment, intimidation and bullying.
- New laws requiring annual public hearings on school violence, the annual observance of School Violence Awareness Week and the imposition of penalties for the falsification of reports of violence.
- The development of an Unsafe School Choice Policy in accordance with federal law.
- The distribution of approximately \$8 million annually in federal Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act funds to local school districts.
- Numerous initiatives related to safe schools, including *Developing Safe and Civil Schools: A Social Emotional Learning Initiative*, the Positive Student Discipline Reform Demonstration Project, the Social Norms Project, the Youth Gang Initiative, the Intervention and Referral Services Initiative, the Safe Schools and Communities Violence Prevention and Response Plan Initiative, the Character Education Initiative, the Title IV-A and USCO Training and Technical Assistance Project and the Peer Transitions Project.
- New Core Curriculum Content Standards focusing on bullying and violence prevention strategies, with a clear emphasis on character education
- A coordinated effort with the Domestic Security Preparedness Task Force to develop best practices for school safety and security and conduct school security audits in all buildings.
- Violence prevention programs created in collaboration with the Attorney General's Office, the departments of Human Services and Health and Senior Services, counseling and mental health organizations, the courts and UMDNJ.

The three schools identified as meeting the definition of "persistently dangerous" under *NCLB* must develop comprehensive corrective action plans to create safer learning environments. The parents of the students must be notified of the schools' status before the start of the new school year and offered in-district choice for their children.

In order to appear on the list, schools must meet the "persistently dangerous" criteria for three years in a row. This year, the department used data reported at the end of the 2003-04, 2004-05 and 2005-06 school years in calculating the status of schools.

"In the past, we did the calculations earlier in the calendar year and used the prior year's data since the EVVRS reports are not completed until after the school year ends," explained Acting Assistant Commissioner for Student Services Barbara Gantwerk. "A number of schools that have appeared on the list in the past expressed concerns that the designation was based on problems that they had already worked to correct."

As a result of the revised calculation method, three of the four schools identified in 2005 – Grace A. Dunn Middle School and Martin Luther King Middle School, both in Trenton and D'Ippolito Intermediate School in Vineland – have been removed from the list. Trenton Central High School is the only school on the 2006 list that was also on the 2005 list.

Attached are:

[The 2006 report on Violence, Vandalism and Substance Abuse in New Jersey Public Schools.](#)

[A list of the 19 districts currently participating in the DOE survey.](#)

[Reporting Information on the Three Schools Meeting the 'Persistently Dangerous' Criteria.](#)