

behavior, the availability of professionals like counselors and social workers, as well as any social-emotional curriculum taught in the classroom.

School climate, in turn, affects students' mental and emotional health and academic success. And research by Astor and others has consistently found key factors that can make schools safer: cultivate social and emotional health, connect to community resources and respond, particularly, to troubled students.

Why does this matter? Well, for one thing, the very kids who bring weapons to school are more likely to report being bullied or threatened themselves. They may be fearful of gang violence and feel a need to protect themselves on the way back and forth to school.

Or, they may be individually ostracized and aggrieved. This is true not just in the United States, says Astor, but in "Kosovo, Canada, Chile, Israel, the kids who bring weapons to school are reporting tons of victimization."

So, if you devote resources to shutting down bullying, discrimination and harassment, there is a chance to de-escalate conflict before it starts.

And research shows that school climate measures really work. In fact, there has been a steady downward trend in bullying and harassment over the past decade, which Catherine Bradshaw at the University of Virginia attributes in part to evidence-based social and emotional measures.

The witnesses

There is a second reason a better school climate can cut down on violence. It's what Astor refers to as the role of the witness. He again cites the example of California, which does a comprehensive annual survey. There, 20 to 30 percent of students above the elementary level consistently report seeing a weapon of some kind at school at least once during the year. That's conservatively more than half a *million* students, just in that one state.

Moreover, based on the survey, at least 125,000 of these students in California were actually threatened or injured by a weapon on school grounds. This includes things like knives and nunchuks as well as guns.

But what happens next?

If that witness, or that victim, has a strong relationship with an adult, they are more likely to report being menaced by a weapon. Whereas, if there is what Astor calls a "no snitching culture" in the school, or the witness fears for their safety, nothing will be done. He says he's not urging schools to punish or expel the kid who brought the weapon, but, instead, to use "education as an intervention."

This approach is applicable not only for mass shootings, he says, but for violence that arises from disputes between students or when gang violence in the community spills onto school grounds.

And, he says preventing gun violence also means looking at suicide. Suicide is just behind homicide as a leading cause of death for teenagers. When a weapon comes to school, self-harm may be the plan, and a school-climate approach addresses that threat as well.

The researchers' policy plan calls for assessing school climate nationwide; reducing "exclusionary practices" like suspension and expulsion; maintaining physically and emotionally safe schools; and staffing up with specialists like counselors, psychiatrists, psychologists and social workers, both in the school and in the community.

Emergency mode

While school climate is an ongoing background effort, the public health approach has an emergency mode when it comes to violence. It kicks in when someone does report a person bringing a weapon to school or talking about violence. It's called a "threat assessment." After the Columbine shooting in 1999, the FBI and the Secret Service each conducted studies of school shootings and shared their knowledge with the nation's educators. They found that there was no