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Can't schools be gang-free zones?

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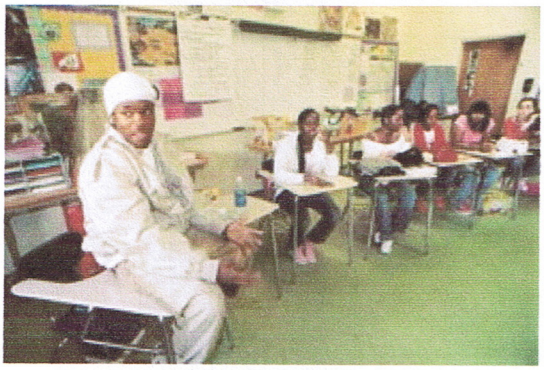

It's hard to hate or judge people once you get to know them, says student Oscar Duncan, president of the YULIV Club at Venice High School in Los Angeles. The club offers students a positive alternative to gangs.

Last spring, a rumor circulated throughout Southern California: There would be violence between African American and Hispanic gang members on Cinco de Mayo.

As a result, newspapers estimate, more than 50,000 students stayed home from school.

While tensions were running high in many Los Angeles schools that day, students at Venice High School were in a festive mood. Teens of all racial groups mingled at a school dance during lunch and munched on free pizza. Remarkably, the harmonious event was sponsored by some of the school's most at-risk students.

"It's hard for people to feel aggravated when they have food in the belly and are feeling happy," says Oscar Duncan, president of the YULIV Club, which stands for Young Urban Leaders Influencing Venice. While as many as a third of the club's members may have or have had gang ties, they have joined together in an effort to make the school a gang-free zone.

"I'm taking kids who are normally sent out of class for getting into fights, and trying to create something positive so they can be seen as leaders instead of kids who are always messing up," explains the club's founder, Henry Lazo, the Title I coordinator at the school and a member of United Teachers Los Angeles. He knows that students

often join gangs out of a need to belong. He decided instead to offer students an opportunity to belong to something positive.

Members are trained in conflict management and given opportunities to practice it on campus. A girl who got in a fight had to go in front of the club and "explain why she let anger get the best of her. Then we put together a skit on how foolish the whole thing seemed," says Lazo.

Another project has been recording a musical version of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I have a dream" speech. While working out creative differences in the music studio, "we learned that constructive criticism can make you a better person," says Duncan. "And we got to know each other a lot better. It's hard to hate or judge people once you get to know them."

Educators across the state are trying to understand what draws students to gangs in an effort to help them make better choices in their lives and make sure schools remain a safe place to teach and learn.

"Kids aren't going to learn if they are thinking about a fight that's going to take place after school," says Mike O'Connor, a peer leadership teacher at Pacific High School in San Bernardino. "Students don't care what the math teacher is talking about when they are worrying about what will happen when they walk home from school."

In some troubled areas, it's not uncommon for schools to serve as recruiting grounds for gangs. Gang members use technology to avoid detection on campus. Everywhere you turn, say teachers, you overhear kids on cell phones saying, "You're clear" or "Here comes security." There's a beeping and chirping undercurrent of text messages about who may be about to get beaten up or whether there will be a rumble after school.

While a school's population may include few hard-core gang members, the numbers "may camouflage the impact

that the presence of gangs has on a school," according to the National Alliance of Gang Investigators Associations. "Their mere presence in school can increase tensions. It can also increase the level of violence in a school, even though gang members themselves may not be directly responsible for all of it."

Henry Lazo in Venice grooms YULIV club members as potential leaders.

While gang influence is growing, many schools have fewer resources to combat the problem. California has the worst ratios in the nation for the number of students to school counselors (934 to 1), psychologists (1,645 to 1) and social workers (25,803 to 1). Nearly a third of school districts have no counseling program at all.

Increasingly, schools are turning to partnerships with law enforcement officers to combat gangs. In Sacramento, the city council added 10 full-time officers, including an anti-gang unit, for campuses in the Natomas and Sacramento City School Districts.

At one school in San Bernardino, a federal negotiator is working with students to address the gang problem.

In Anaheim, the Safe Schools project is entering its 10th year of a partnership with law enforcement. Jim McGovern, a teacher on special assignment, interviews students suspected of gang involvement and works with police officers to offer early intervention. The school also has a hotline where students can leave anonymous tips about upcoming fights, weapons on campus or other gang-related activity.

There's no mystery about why students join gangs. It's for protection, identification, status and acceptance, say teachers. Many gang members come from broken families. Gangs offer them the love they may not have known at home. In addition to acting as an extended family, the gang may offer power, cars, money and fancy clothes.

The number of bona fide gang members on any given campus is probably small, but it's compounded by the number of students who are "wannabes."

While many dismiss wannabes

as kids going through a stage, Jose Cavazos, a teacher at Loma Vista Elementary in Salinas and a member of the Salinas Elementary Teachers Council, believes they are in the most danger. "A wannabe is trying to make a name for himself, so he'll do something in the neighborhood to get notoriety and move up the status ladder." Those who are already in a gang don't have as much to prove.

Jose Cavazos conducts a gang awareness workshop for teachers like Evie Bolante in Salinas.

In Sacramento last Thanksgiving, a 13-year-old wannabe was killed in a drive-by shooting while talking with his older brother's gang friends.

"It was a very sobering feeling that came over the staff" at Will C. Wood Middle School, where the boy was a student, says Olivia Alvarado, a school social worker and a member of the Sacramento City Teachers Association (SCTA). "A lot of teachers can't relate to this. And we can't expect them to, because they didn't grow up living the kind of lives our kids do."

Gangs can spread unexpectedly from school to school as students transfer from gang-impacted schools to gang-free schools.

Asian gangs are a growing problem in Sacramento, says Patrick Vang, an SCTA member who teaches at Luther Burbank High School. Hmong students join gangs because they face discrimination in schools and have little, if any, parental control.

Because the students often act as translators for parents who don't speak English and are not educated, the children take over the parenting role. "It's crazy. This issue is very complicated for the parents. They do their best, but they have never dealt with this in their own culture before."

In the classroom, says Vang, "Hmong gang members are very quiet and

cause no behavior problems. But once they leave, they can be very dangerous."

Mimi Anderson works with Soledad Hernandez and Tanya Fajardo in her after-school program in Riverside.

Some gangs also include girls, says Mimi Anderson, a teacher at Central Middle School in Riverside and a CTA Gang Intervention cadre member. There are also girl gangs, usually affiliated with male gangs. "It's my observation that gangs are more detrimental to girls," says Anderson, a member of the Riverside City Teachers Association. "It seems more difficult for girls to recover from it and get their lives back on track."

"Even teachers in elementary schools are seeing gang-like behavior," says Jody Liss-Monteleone, a counselor at Placerita Junior High School in Santa Clarita. "I think it's partly due to the media - television and music videos - that idealize the gang life, the 'bling bling' (money) and the drug culture."

"What's scary is that some of the students say they aren't afraid of dying," says Liss-Monteleone, a member of the Hart District Teachers Association (HDTA) and a trainer for CTA's Gang Intervention cadre. "They say, 'If I back up my homie, it doesn't matter if I die.' They aren't mature enough to understand the concept of life and death. They don't see the possibility of a different lifestyle for themselves."

In Salinas, teachers at a workshop put on by CTA's Gang Intervention cadre say some of their elementary and middle school students have been recruited by older gang members to sell drugs. The children have been told that they won't go to jail because they're so young.

Some of the children's parents are gang members and behind bars. Parents come to parent-teacher conferences without making an effort to hide their gang tattoos.

"For some reason a lot more of the kids becoming involved are the ones you wouldn't imagine," says Arturo Escandon, a social studies teacher at Jefferson High School in Los Angeles and a member of United Teachers Los Angeles. "They are quiet kids who seem to want to belong to something - the kind of kids you stereotype as good kids. Individually, they are nice kids and

very well-mannered."

Gangs are more attractive to students with time on their hands, he adds. "In my generation, sports saved a lot of us."

He figures the people making the decisions about cuts to athletic programs and extracurricular activities "didn't grow up in this kind of environment and don't know how important sports are."

Escandon has seen a rise in the number of students who have formed "crews," which some liken to "mini-gangs" ripe for recruitment by established gangs, similar to baseball's farm leagues.

"Crews do every kind of violence that a gang does except for shootings and drive-bys," says Escandon. "Some of them are already affiliated with big gangs."

Gangs are attractive to kids with time on their hands, says Arturo Escandon at Jefferson High School in Los Angeles.

Arturo Selva, a UTLA member who teaches at Bridge Street Elementary School in East Los Angeles, believes that No Child Left Behind has contributed to the growing gang problem among poor and minority students.

"Aside from the obvious reasons for the creation of gangs - poverty and lack of family involvement - there is something else," says Selva, whose school is surrounded by Latino gang territory. "Because of testing and the pressure to raise scores, teachers sometimes don't have time to listen to students' problems, be creative in the classroom and relate to students one-to-one. Instead, students are seen as only being 'below basic.'"

With cuts in art, music and physical education in many poor and minority schools, he adds, students who once excelled in these categories are no longer recognized.

Worst of all, Selva believes the pressure to raise

test scores filters down from administrators to teachers and ultimately to students.

"When children feel like failures - even in kindergarten or first grade - they begin waiting for the time when they are big enough to say they are not going to school.

"I think we have to work with schools to provide a meaningful, friendly and amenable atmosphere where success is a pivotal word and children are accepted for their differences," he says.

After all, "gangs will say, 'We accept you whether you read well or not.'"

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