

April 28, 2009

Governor John Corzine
Office of the Governor
P.O. Box 001
Trenton, NJ 08625

Dear Governor Corzine:

Once again our community was in harrow and disbelief last summer, as we witnessed another mass murder in our nation's schools, with over 30 dead. Along with profound feelings of helplessness, we search for answers to the question of how to prevent such killings. These answers range from strengthening security to conducting psychological evaluations of incoming students.

I am the President of the New Jersey Violence Prevention Institute, a non-profit organization, as well as a licensed New Jersey Psychologist. I have studied violent behavior for over 25 years. What I see happening now in the media regarding this latest killing is typical in traumatic situations. A common first response to trauma is to look to short term solutions which provide temporary relief from the anxiety that such an event has occurred and may happen again. This type of anxiety-driven solution may include stationing police officers in the schools and/or installing cameras and metal detectors. However, these solutions tend to offer only a false sense of security. In many examples throughout the years, school shooters have fired at and killed security guards, as well as taken their own lives

A second common response to traumatic situations is to develop a long term program that can have an impact on reducing the likelihood of such an occurrence. However, long term programs are often overlooked because they do not offer immediate relief from anxiety.

In general, there are four steps leading up to any violent act. I will describe these steps, along with my recommendations for developing effective long term solutions for the problem of violence in New Jersey Schools.

All acts of violence begin with the **belief** that a person has been wronged, defamed, or somehow injured and feels justified in his/her anger or rage about a particular situation. Once a person has been wronged, he or she feels compelled to look at **alternatives** to resolving his/her grievance. This is the second step in the sequence toward violence. Some non-violent avenues may include filing a lawsuit or some verbal expression of grievance. When non-violent avenues appear to be blocked to the individual, the third factor, the potential **consequences** of making a violent choice are evaluated by the individual. Certainly those who are intent on killing themselves have no regard for any consequences. The fourth factor involves **ability** to commit

violence, and refers to the presence of weapons, especially handguns, that are available to the individual.

Most efforts at preventing violence seek to address the last three factors. They include conflict resolution programs to teach the individual non-violent alternatives. Others involve increasing penalties or consequences, gun control and screenings to prevent weapons from coming into school. The problem with all these approaches is that they ignore the fundamental, overwhelming power of anger to override all conscience thought and lead one down a path of destruction. If one cannot regulate ones anger, it is not possible to look at reasonable alternatives, such as conflict resolution, or to have concern about potential consequences.

What I am proposing is to implement a program in the New Jersey schools teaching students how to **regulate** their anger. This would begin in kindergarten and continue through high school. Anger can be regulated, but not managed. It is most effectively addressed as an internal emotional state, before it leads to aggressive and destructive behavior. For additional information I refer you to the website www.compassionpower.com and to my website www.njvpi.com.

I would be glad to meet regarding my proposal.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Ronald J. Coughlin, Ed.D.

RJC/kg