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NASP Welcomes Surgeon General's Report on Youth Violence, Supports Collaborative School-Community Prevention/Intervention Programs

Bethesda, MD—"Reducing violent behavior among our nation's young people is a top priority," says Scott Poland, President of the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP). "Surgeon General David Satcher has made a tremendous contribution to that effort with his report 'Youth Violence: A Report of the Surgeon General.'" The report warns that, although the epidemic of youth violence is not over, there are a number of proven strategies to address risk factors that can lead children to violence.

School psychologists work with parents, educators, and service providers on many of the issues highlighted in the report. NASP and its members help to promote "best practices" to identify and assess potential risks and then implement appropriate research-based strategies.

"It is encouraging that we are taking a comprehensive look at youth violence from a public health perspective," notes Poland. "We must consider the environmental, physical, and mental health factors contributing to violent behavior and recognize the importance of prevention when addressing them."

NASP is a strong advocate for prevention-based approaches to address the multiple factors shaping children's behavior. "We know that prevention is the best approach with almost any issue concerning children and youth. Our association believes we must help students become more involved in their own school safety. We must end the conspiracy of silence that allows guns and weapons to be in our schools. NASP recommends a comprehensive approach to school safety that balances security measures with behavioral prevention and intervention strategies such as increased counseling services, afterschool programs, and curricula that emphasize teaching young people social skills and anger management techniques. "

The report highlights the imperative to stop putting resources into programs that have little or no efficacy and start directing resources to evidence-based programs to reduce violent behavior. Key elements of such programs as outlined in the report include addressing individual risks and environmental conditions, providing behavioral interventions and parent effectiveness training, building skills and competencies, improving the social climate of school, and promoting positive peer group involvement.

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“There are some important messages in this report that resonate with school psychologists and others who work with kids every day,” observes Poland. “First, the situation is not hopeless; we can make a difference. While you cannot predetermine a future offender based on early childhood behaviors or problems, you can identify types of risk within a population and work to minimize their influence. Second, we must create a cohesive community-school culture in which violent behavior—even at the lowest levels of teasing and bullying—is unacceptable and commitment to healthy relationships with family, teachers, and peers is the norm.”

Schools must play a significant role to help implement these strategies, according to Poland. “The school experience has a huge impact on children’s social and emotional development. School professionals typically have the most extended and intensive interaction with children other than parents. It is our responsibility to provide an environment that is positive, observant, and responsive to students’ needs before they lead to unhealthy behaviors.”

Poland emphasizes that schools need adequate resources to meet this challenge and must collaborate closely with community services and families. “As the report states, risk factors do not operate in isolation. Neither can intervention strategies,” he says. “Policymakers have to rethink how they define and fund services. Certainly we need greater resources, but we also need cohesive, coordinated delivery systems and funding.”

NASP will continue to work with allied organizations, government agencies, and lawmakers to develop policies that can make a real and lasting difference in the lives of our nation’s youth. “The basic principles underlying strategies that are effective in reducing violent behavior are the same as those underlying healthy development and learning for all children,” concludes Poland. “If we successfully incorporate these principles as underpinnings of our communities and schools, not only will violence decline, but our young people will benefit in all areas of their lives.”

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NASP represents 24,000 school psychologists throughout the United States and abroad. NASP’s mission is to represent and support school psychology through leadership to enhance the mental health and educational competence of all children. For further information visit www.nasponline.org.