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## Into School, Out Of Control

### Nowadays, Even The Youngest Students Turn To Violence

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At Holmes Elementary School in New Britain last month, school administrators and faculty members were getting ready to host a celebration for the school's 50th anniversary that was expected to draw hundreds of parents and prominent city figures, including School Superintendent Doris Kurtz and Mayor Tim Stewart.

But a few minutes before the ceremony was to begin, a staff member walked briskly down a school hallway warning people to clear the area because of a potential hazard.

The hazard, it turned out, was a student. Concerned that the grade-schooler's out-of-control behavior could pose a danger to others, school officials felt it would be best to make sure that no one was around as they tried to calm the youngster.

The boy, who was not identified, ultimately was taken to a nearby hospital for evaluation because of his dangerous behavior, which included shouting and lunging violently at the adults who tried to help him.

School district officials say the incident was not isolated. More and more, they say, they are encountering students in the earliest grades, including kindergarten, whose behavior poses a threat to both themselves and the children around them. The problem has become so serious that New Britain recently created special classrooms for young students with unmanageable behavior issues.

These out-of-control students, officials say, are not suffering from learning disabilities or mental health problems that might explain dangerous behavior. Instead, officials say, these are students who simply do not have the basic skills to calm themselves down when they get upset or to cope with disappointment when things don't go their way.

The problem of violence among older children at the high school and middle school levels has been present for years in New Britain and across the country. But now, school officials say, an increasing number of elementary school children are resorting to physical and psychological abuse to resolve conflicts.

During the 2004-05 school year, New Britain schools issued disciplinary suspensions to 346 students in grades 1-5, including 106 fourth-graders, according to the state Department of Education. The year before, the school district suspended 254 students in grades 1-5.

New Britain officials said they could not provide the total number of suspensions for students in the same grade levels for the 2005-06 school year or the current school year that ends in June. But New Britain officials said they have been surprised by the severity of the behavior exhibited by many elementary school children this year.

Grade school teachers in the district have reported students who have repeatedly struck other

students without provocation or who have tried to attack teachers and administrators. Some grade-schoolers have been spotted taking their clothes off in the middle of class, and others have made sexually suggestive comments or gestures that would seem well beyond their comprehension.

"You wouldn't believe the things we're seeing from kids at this age," said Lori Butterfield, a teacher at Holmes. "More and more, their first instinct is to react to a situation with violence. It makes it very challenging for teachers because we need to make sure the rest of the kids are being taught, while at the same time making sure that a particular student's behavior isn't going to escalate out of control."

Jon Walek, the district's director of pupil services, said special "support" classrooms have been set up in two of the city's elementary schools, where students with chronic behavior problems have been sent to continue their instruction apart from the classrooms where they were originally assigned.

So far, Walek said, 16 elementary school students have been assigned to the support classrooms, which are staffed by teachers who have advanced training in handling unruly youngsters. He said the goal of the classrooms is to make sure the students are keeping up with their instruction while school officials work to figure out how to correct their behavior so they can return to their old classroom. "That's the whole purpose, to get them back on track," Walek said. "We want these support classrooms to be as temporary as possible."

Assigning students to the support classroom is the last option after a series of escalated steps aimed at helping them improve their behavior, Walek said. Once a teacher feels that a particular student's behavior has become unmanageable, he said, the school can have a social worker or psychologist evaluate the student.

Walek said the district does not endorse a "command and control" approach to handling disruptive students.

"We feel that's only going to exacerbate the behavior," he said. "In most cases, these children are either looking for attention or acting out extreme frustration or anger, and confronting them is not the most positive way to address that."

Instead, Walek said, the best way to help a student come to terms with behavioral problems is to temporarily remove them from the classroom to help them calm down and figure out why they are acting out.

The school district's philosophy is shared by administrators in other school districts in the state, including Leah O'Neill-Fichtner, director of student support services for Hartford Public Schools.

O'Neill-Fichtner said the district recently created a program in which disruptive students are sent to a special room called the comprehensive student intervention center. There, they are confronted by trained specialists who help them understand why they are acting out, and then return them to the classroom to apologize to either a teacher or a fellow student they may have harmed.

"It's not a punishment center," O'Neill-Fichtner said. "We want them to be out of the classroom, ideally for 15 to 20 minutes, and then return them so they don't lose any more ground academically."

Hartford and other school districts also have entire schools specially dedicated to students with significant behavior problems. In East Hartford, such students are sent to the Woodland School, which extends from kindergarten to 12th grade.

Dee Speese-Linehan, the supervisor of social development for New Haven Public Schools, said there are a variety of reasons why students are becoming increasingly violent at younger ages. Within the schools, she said, there has become such an emphasis on standardized testing that there is now very little time for recess and gym and other outlets for young children to let off steam.

"It's not like it was when we were kids, when you could expect to have an hour or so every day to play and explore," she said. "That kind of time just isn't there anymore, and I think it's really frustrating for our younger children."

The push to meet expectations for standardized testing means that there is also less time for creative endeavors inside the classroom, Speese-Linehan said.

"They're not as free as they once were to discover their creative side because they're being drilled on the standardized tests so much," she said. "I think that contributes to behavioral problems."

Another factor, according to Walek, is that many young children in lower-income populations such as New Britain are enrolling in kindergarten without going through pre-kindergarten or other preschool programs aimed at helping toddlers learn to socialize.

"A lot of these kids come into kindergarten and they have no concept of the idea of sharing or waiting for something because they've never been exposed to that kind of structured environment," he said.

Many administrators said young children are also heavily influenced by what they see on television and video games. "They see all these people resolving their problems through violence, whether it's a cartoon or a video game, and they get the message that that's how it's done," Speese-Linehan said.

But the brunt of the problem, according to teachers like Butterfield, has to be placed at the feet of parents.

"Parents just don't want to say no to their children anymore," she said. "Some of them don't even know how. So we get these kids coming into our classrooms, and when we tell them no, they freak out."

And when teachers try to show young children that they must learn to share and control their behavior, Butterfield said, they often receive no support from parents.

"A lot of times we get yelled at by the parents to stop upsetting their children," she said. "It's a totally different culture from the old days, when teachers and parents worked together to let children know what was expected of them."

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