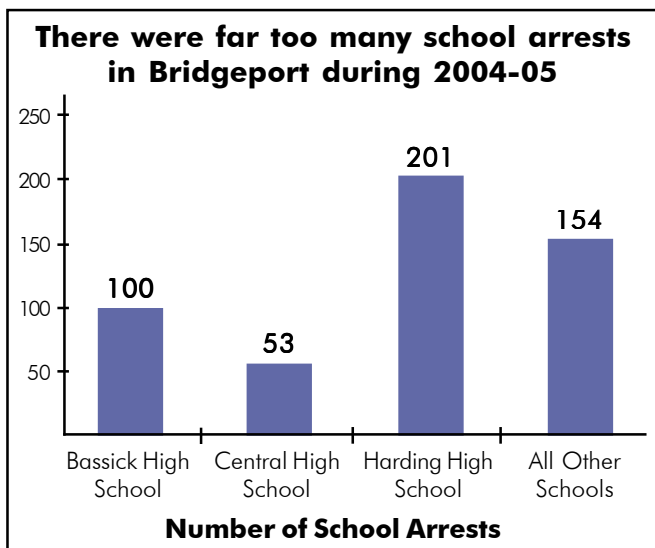


You Can't Learn If You Don't Feel Safe

School Security Problems in the Bridgeport Schools and What Can Be Done

An increase in violence and serious behavior problems in the Bridgeport schools last year resulted in 508 student arrests. Bridgeport's three high schools continue to experience problems this year. Immediate action is required to address the problems in a comprehensive way. Our children deserve safe and supportive schools in which to learn.



Source: Board of Education Office of School Police and Security

School violence disrupts the educational experience of all students

Students in any school where there is violence worry about their safety and have difficulty learning. Last year, schools in Bridgeport were disrupted by a disturbing number of security incidents and student arrests. While most arrests occurred in the high schools, an alarming 27% of all student arrests happened at schools with kindergarten through eighth grade students, an indication that school security is a problem in all our schools.

THERE IS NO SINGLE CAUSE FOR SCHOOL SECURITY PROBLEMS

The increase in serious behavior problems in our schools has many different causes. All must be addressed to make Bridgeport's schools safe.

Contributing Factors

- Education funding not kept pace with student needs
- Too few teachers
- High turnover of teachers and principals in some schools
- Too few social workers and school psychologists
- Too few prevention/early intervention programs to help develop students' social and emotional learning
- Overcrowded classrooms and overcrowded schools
- Delays in construction of new schools to replace antiquated facilities and provide needed space
- Too few remedial education programs for students who have fallen behind academically
- Too few alternative education programs for students
- Too few after-school programs and activities for students

Bridgeport can learn from many other school districts that have successfully reduced school violence, enabling them to focus on improving academic outcomes. Bridgeport can follow the lead of Kansas City, Chicago, Cleveland, Philadelphia and many others. Some promising changes in the Bridgeport schools are already starting to make a difference.

There is much that can be done. But, it will take a concerted effort by the Board of Education with the support of parents, the community and all elected officials of the City of Bridgeport.

**Can
Bridgeport
Make Its
Schools Safe?
YES.**

The Bottom Line:

To make Bridgeport's schools safe, we need a comprehensive plan to improve every aspect of our schools, and we need additional resources and support services.

WHAT PROMISING CHANGES ARE STARTING TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE & IMPROVE SCHOOL CLIMATE

The PARK Project: Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS)

PBIS was introduced at Harding High School in January 2005 and at five other schools in the Harding cluster in September 2004 —Barnum, Barnum Annex, Bridgeport Learning Center, Dunbar and Marin

Nationally recognized for its success in preventing and responding to classroom and school discipline problems, PBIS has been adopted by a number of states and large cities. Students in schools that successfully implement PBIS spend more time in instruction. Instruction time becomes more effective as teachers focus more on instructional preparation and less on disciplinary issues. Research in PBIS schools shows that as disciplinary referrals decline, reading scores improve.

The goal of PBIS is to create schools that are:

Predictable: Students and teachers know what is expected

Consistent: Similar standards are used by all adults

Safe : Unsafe behavior and physical abuse are not acceptable

Positive: Adults emphasize and recognize appropriate behavior

While it typically takes three years to see dramatic change, students are beginning to respond to the program. Already, the disciplinary environment is stabilizing and school climate is improving in Bridgeport's PBIS schools. At Harding High School, the average number of disciplinary problems has dropped noticeably. PBIS holds promise for Bridgeport, but local evaluators also note that a larger than expected number of students require more intensive interventions and wrap-around support services, a challenge with Bridgeport's education budget deficits. Although it requires more resources to be effective and to expand to all schools, PBIS may be one of Bridgeport's most effective strategies to address school violence.

PATHS: Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies

PATHS, another nationally recognized program, has been introduced in two Bridgeport schools by the School-Based Health Centers. This curriculum teaches children in grades K-6 important skills, such as how to increase self-control, understand differences between feeling and behavior, and develop empathy for others. Children learn to use these skills to prevent behavioral problems. PATHS also has a parent outreach component to help transfer skills learned in school to the home environment.

National studies of schools where the PATHS curriculum is used show that children are better at recognizing their emotions, maintaining self-control, tolerating frustration, and developing effective strategies to resolve conflicts. Studies of PATHS in urban public schools show similar positive results but only when principals support the integration of PATHS into their schools and emphasize the development of a school environment in which children can practice the behavioral skills they have learned.

PATHS was introduced in two elementary schools in 2001, but the program has continued only at Roosevelt School. Evaluations show positive results in improved attention and behavior scores for both boys and girls. Teachers report that PATHS has helped develop children's emotional skills and their ability to apply these new skills in the classroom environment.

Other Promising Initiatives

Building caring relationships to help students connect to their schools

Two Bridgeport high schools are implementing programs to help students connect better with their schools. The goal of the Advisory Program at Bassick High School is to strengthen students' connections to school by assigning teachers or administrators to small groups of students who meet daily. At Central High School, a special class is being developed to help 9th graders transition into high school and develop their social/emotional, leadership and study skills.

Restructuring high schools into smaller learning communities

Research has found that small schools of 400-500 students have lower rates of fighting and disruptive behavior; improved attendance and graduation rates; and higher student, teacher and parent satisfaction. Often, high school students are more successful academically in small schools. Similar benefits have been found in large schools that have been restructured into smaller learning communities.

Two Bridgeport high schools are working to break down their large and overcrowded schools into smaller learning communities. At Bassick High School, freshmen and sophomores are divided into sections, each taught by the same team of teachers and guidance counselors. Central High School is planning to divide its student population into four smaller, physically separate schools in which teachers will teach the same students for four years.

ASSESSMENT OF CURRENT INITIATIVES IN BRIDGEPORT SCHOOLS

While representing positive steps to prevent school violence and improve school climate in Bridgeport, the programs discussed have been implemented in isolation, at the initiative of a few principals, and only in a few schools. The few promising programs or initiatives in our schools have not been developed as part of a vision and plan for the district as a whole. Results and lessons learned have not been shared with all schools. And these programs have not spread to other schools.

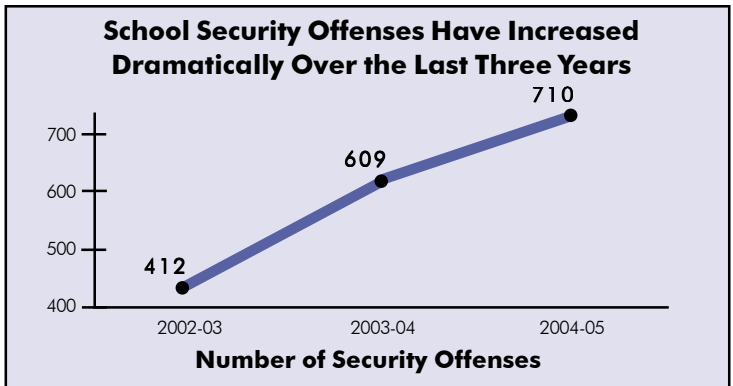
What our schools need is a systematic, integrated approach across the entire school district for supporting school safety, encouraging positive behavior among students, and improving school climate. Bridgeport needs an overarching vision and plan for school improvement that includes school safety. Such a plan must be embraced by school principals and teachers, elected officials, parents and the community.

School Violence Is Increasing

MEASURING SCHOOL VIOLENCE: SECURITY OFFENSES

School security offenses include fighting, assault, breach of peace, use or possession of weapons, drugs or alcohol, robbery, harassment and threatening behavior.

- There were 710 school security offenses last year, representing an alarming 72% increase in just three years.
- Security offenses in the three high schools more than doubled since 2002-03, mostly because of an increase in fights which often involve multiple students.
- Harding High School has been the most troubled high school, accounting for 75% of the overall increase in school security offenses over the last three years.



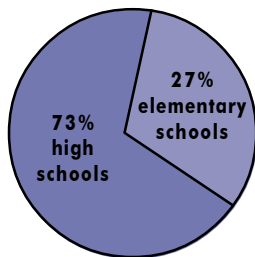
Source: Board of Education Office of School Police and Security

Harding High School is severely overcrowded — 21% over capacity — and has experienced significant administrative turnover with the departure of 2 principals, 2 interim principals and 7 assistant principals during the 2002-03 and 2003-04 school years.

Harding now has a permanent principal who has been there for a year and a half. It also has introduced a special program — Positive Behavioral Supports and Interventions (PBIS) — to develop and implement strategies to improve student behavior and school culture. Since school safety problems often take root in the years before students get to high school, PBIS has been introduced at several of Harding’s feeder elementary schools.

MEASURING SCHOOL VIOLENCE: STUDENT ARRESTS

508 Student Arrests Last Year

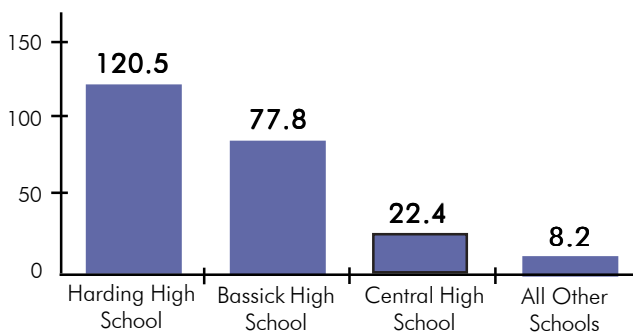


2004-05 School Year

There is a significant difference in arrest rates among Bridgeport schools. During the 2004-05 school year, the student arrest rate at Bassick High School was three times that at Central High School. The student arrest rate at Harding High School was 50% higher than at Bassick High School and more than five times higher than at Central High School.

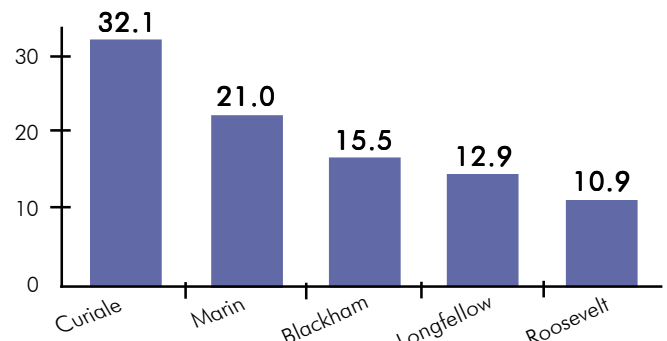
There is a similar wide disparity in arrest rates among Bridgeport elementary schools. In 2004-05, ten elementary schools had no arrests. However, five of the eight elementary schools that have the largest student enrollments had high arrest rates. In 2004-05, the student arrest rate at Curiale School was higher than at Central High School.

The Student Arrest Rate at Harding Is Five Times the Arrest Rate at Central



Arrests per 1,000 Students, 2004-05 School Year

Five Elementary Schools Had High Arrest Rates



Arrests per 1,000 Students, 2004-05 School Year

Source: Board of Education Office of School Police and Security

INSIGHTS FROM THE COMMUNITY: SCHOOL CLIMATE IS NOT POSITIVE

In late 2004 and again this school year, students, parents and community leaders have come together with teachers, principals, administrators, school board members and elected officials in a series of town meetings to discuss school violence, its causes and possible solutions. To gain further insight, BCAC also met with Bridgeport school administrators and high school principals and with senior administrators outside the district. Here is what they are saying...

Insights from the Community	Students, Parents & Community Leaders	Principals & Teachers	District & Other Administrators
A relatively small number of students are involved in most of the school safety problems	✓	✓	
The students involved generally have the poorest academic preparation and reading skills	✓	✓	
Gangs are increasingly disruptive to school climate	✓	✓	
Bullying is a problem in the schools	✓	✓	
Many students don't know where to turn for help when confronted with bullies, harassing behavior or other school difficulties	✓	✓	
There are few alternative learning programs available for students with discipline problems	✓	✓	
Students don't feel "connected" to their schools	✓	✓	
Students don't trust the school structure to work for them	✓	✓	
Discipline and control is inconsistent or lacking at some schools	✓		
More security is needed in the schools, not more police	✓		
Parental involvement in schools is very low	✓	✓	
School District lacks a vision of what the educational system in Bridgeport should be		✓	✓
School District's approach to problem has been narrowly focused. Analysis of the root causes of school violence is lacking. School District cannot develop a plan to address violence without understanding the causes.			✓
Leadership capacity of principals needs to be developed		✓	✓
Teaching and counseling infrastructure has been severely weakened by funding cuts	✓	✓	✓

Violent Behavior in Schools Is Closely Related to School Climate

Although no school can honestly claim to be violence-proof, certain elements of the school culture and climate act as either protective factors or risk factors, decreasing or heightening the tendency of schools to be safe or unsafe.

— Clearinghouse on Educational Policy and Management, University of Oregon College of Education

WHY IS POSITIVE CLIMATE SO IMPORTANT IN PREVENTING VIOLENT BEHAVIOR?

School climate is the degree to which a school is perceived to be a warm, welcoming and safe place where students can learn and develop. School climate is also influenced by the physical appearance of schools.

Research suggests that positive school climate leads to lower suspension rates, improved attendance, higher student achievement, and greater satisfaction among students, staff and parents. Students who have a better sense of being connected to their schools are less likely to engage in violent behavior, abuse alcohol and drugs, or engage in sexual activity.

COMPONENTS OF POSITIVE SCHOOL CLIMATE

- A sense of order and discipline
- Staff dedication to student learning
- High expectations for students' academic performance and behavior
- Caring relationships
- Respectful interactions
- Open communication and collaboration among principals, teachers and staff
- Involvement of parents and community organizations

MEASURING SCHOOL VIOLENCE: SCHOOL SUSPENSIONS

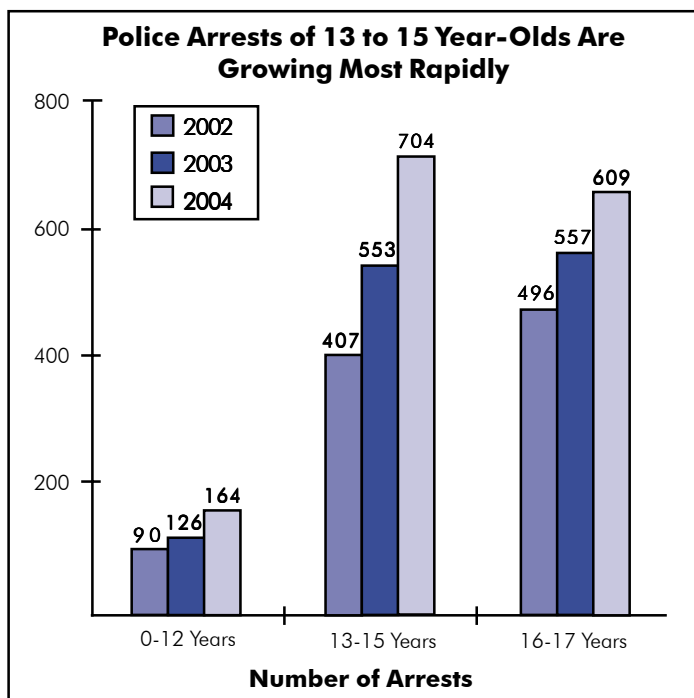
Student suspensions are a key measure of the level of disciplinary problems in schools. The number of school suspensions is high and growing even higher, particularly at the elementary schools.

- The total number of student suspensions, both in school and out of school, is very high with 12,057 last year.
- Over 60% of all suspensions occurred in the elementary schools. Suspensions at the elementary schools increased by more than 36% over the last three years.
- At the three high schools, out-of-school suspensions have been replacing in-school suspensions. Over the last three years, in-school suspensions declined dramatically from 3,203 to 468, while out-of-school suspensions nearly doubled from 2,275 to 4,221. This shift was due largely to personnel cuts, which deprived high schools of staff needed to supervise students receiving in-school suspensions.

Note: In the 2004-05 school year, there were 22,391 students enrolled in the Bridgeport public schools.

Nationally, schools, particularly those in urban areas, are reportedly suspending record numbers of students. Critics of student suspension say it is a reactive and ineffective approach that fails to address root causes of misbehavior. A more effective approach, they argue, would be to offer prevention programs that give students skills for handling conflict, classes that encourage parents to provide consistent discipline at home, an engaging curriculum, a good school climate, and clear behavioral expectations at school.
Social Development Research Group,
Journal of School Health

ARRESTS OF YOUTH IN COMMUNITY PARALLEL RISE IN SCHOOL VIOLENCE



Source: Bridgeport Police Department

- Arrests of youth under age 18 by Bridgeport Police have increased by almost 50% over the last three years, but especially for 13 to 15 year-olds.
- A recent RYASAP study found that over half of all arrests of youth age 15 and under occurred in a Bridgeport school.
- Police arrests of 13 to 15 year-olds for assaults and disorderly conduct have almost doubled over the last three years.
- Girl-fighting is also on the rise. Overall, there are more than three times as many arrests of boys as girls. However, in assaults, there were three girls arrested for every four boys arrested. School officials report that aggression and fighting by girls is a significant factor in the increase in school violence.
- Police officials report that gang recruitment and gang activity are increasing. Police arrest reports noting gang activity increased 63% over the last 21 months from 35 to 57 arrest reports in which gang activity was specifically noted in the arrest report.

The Impact of School Violence

IF STUDENTS DO NOT FEEL SAFE, THEIR COMMITMENT TO LEARNING SUFFERS

The 2005 RYASAP survey of Bridgeport youth in grades 7 to 12 reported a significant and disturbing change in students' commitment to learning from the previous survey in 2001.

Percent of students who reported that they:	2001	2005
Felt bonded or cared deeply about their school	56%	44%
Saw their schools as caring places	27%	24%
Were engaged with school	58%	52%

TEACHER MORALE SUFFERS IN SCHOOLS WHERE THERE ARE SECURITY PROBLEMS

Teacher turnover has been highest in Bridgeport schools where there are more security problems. At the beginning of the 2003-04 school year (the most recent data available), the percent of certified teaching staff returning to two schools that experienced sharp increases in security problems was far lower than at other schools.

- Only 81.2% of certified teachers at Harding High School returned in 2003-04, compared to 92.6% at Bassick High School and 93.7% at Central High School.
- 75% of certified teaching staff returned to Curiale School at the beginning of the 2003-04 school year, compared to the district-wide average for elementary schools of 83.6%.

SCHOOL VIOLENCE CREATES A NEGATIVE ATMOSPHERE & POOR SCHOOL CLIMATE

Research shows that a culture of violence in schools adversely affects students, teachers and administrators. Students exposed to violence at school may react by staying home to avoid the threat or by taking weapons to school in order to defend themselves. And teachers may burn out after years of dealing with discipline problems and threats that prevent them from being able to teach. Poor school climate can create the conditions for escalating school violence.

School Violence and Lack of School Funding

THE ROLE OF CUTS, CUTS AND YET MORE CUTS TO THE EDUCATION BUDGET

Bridgeport's education budget doesn't provide funds to spend on what research shows can help, such as hiring more teachers, school social workers and psychologists; providing prevention/early intervention programs and curricula that develop social and emotional learning at every grade level; and offering remedial education or alternative education to every student who needs these programs.

While state funding for Bridgeport's education budget has increased from \$140.4 million to \$149.8 million over the last five years, it has not kept pace with the needs of Bridgeport's students nor even with inflationary and contractual increases. City funding for the education budget has decreased over the last five years, taking away the gains from increased state funding.

BRIDGEPORT'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE EDUCATION BUDGET HAS BEEN CUT REPEATEDLY AND NOW IS FAR LESS THAN FIVE YEARS AGO

School Year	City Dollars to Education	Difference from Prior Year	Inflation Adjusted City Contribution per Student*
2001-02	\$14,776,288	\$3,441,795	\$648
2002-03	\$12,699,274	-\$2,077,014	\$541
2003-04	\$14,068,986	\$1,369,712	\$615
2004-05	\$13,139,211	-\$929,775	\$574
2005-06	\$12,134,330	-\$1,004,881	\$550

* Adjusted for change in Urban Consumer Price Index.
Source: Bridgeport City Budget; Connecticut State Department of Education

BRIDGEPORT'S TOTAL PER STUDENT SPENDING FALLS FAR SHORT IN COMPARISON TO HARTFORD AND NEW HAVEN

2003-04 School Year	Hartford	New Haven	Bridgeport
Per Student Spending	\$12,429	\$12,627	\$9,752
Rank out of 169 CT cities and towns	15	12	85

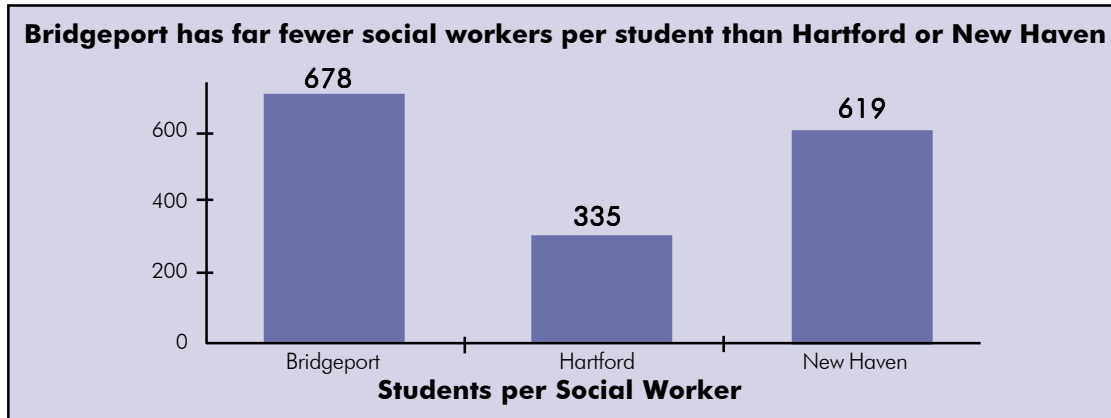
Source: Connecticut Department of Education

OVERCROWDING & LARGE CLASSROOMS CONTRIBUTE TO SCHOOL VIOLENCE

In all grades measured by the state, class sizes in Bridgeport schools are significantly larger than those in Hartford and New Haven or in other districts across the state.

- 76% of Bridgeport's K-3 classes are overcrowded, exceeding the state recommendation of no more than 18 students.
- 58% of Bridgeport's grade 4-8 classes are overcrowded, with more than 25 students.
- In Bridgeport's high schools, 35% are overcrowded, with more than 25 students.

BRIDGEPORT SCHOOLS LACK THE PROFESSIONAL STAFF WHO CAN HELP STUDENTS



Source: Connecticut Department of Education

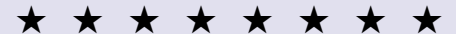
YEARS OF DELAY IN BUILDING NEW SCHOOLS

"Students can read the message on the walls. When their school has peeling paint, clogged toilets, a leaky roof, dark hallways, littered playgrounds and poor air quality, the message is that these students and their education are not respected or valued."
Every Child Learning: Safe and Supportive Schools, Learning First Alliance, 2001

Both Harding and Central High Schools currently operate at more than 20% above capacity. A fourth high school is desperately needed.

Many other Bridgeport schools are in dire need of being replaced or completely renovated. Bridgeport has 14 schools that are 50-99 years old and another six that are more than 100 years old.

From 1999-2002, five school construction projects – four K-8 schools and a new fourth high school to relieve overcrowding – were approved for funding by the state. Progress in moving these five school construction projects forward has been excruciatingly slow. To date, only one of the four K-8 schools approved for state funding is under construction. Instead of building a fourth high school, the Board of Education approved plans for a new regional magnet high school in 2005 that will include 1,000 Bridgeport students. State approval is expected in 2006. A fourth high school, desperately needed to relieve overcrowding and help reduce school violence, will have been delayed at least seven years.



The City of New Haven's commitment to school construction stands in stark contrast to what hasn't happened in Bridgeport. In 1995, New Haven launched a \$1.15 billion school construction program, the largest ever undertaken in Connecticut. At its completion, every public school in New Haven will either have been replaced or thoroughly renovated. Since 1998, construction has been completed on 20 schools with 27 more schools currently under construction or in the planning and design phase.

"...safe urban schools share the following characteristics: they are small and attempt to treat students as individuals; they actively seek to bridge the gap between school and community by involving parents and community residents in the school in a variety of mutually supportive relationships; they attempt to create a physical environment that is aesthetically pleasant to be in; and they focus less energy on enforcing rules than on developing relationships between adults and students to foster trust and personal accountability."

Pedro A. Noguera, "The Critical State of Violence Prevention," School Administrator, February 1996

Recommendations for the Superintendent of Schools

How do we get there? *With new leadership at the helm of our public schools, there is tremendous opportunity at hand to improve school safety and security and to create supportive learning environments in every school. There is an urgent need to act now. Improvements in school climate, culture and learning take time, but every moment lost will leave more students behind. The risk of failing to act far outweighs the challenges ahead.*

Create a Vision and Strategy to Improve Our Schools

- Develop a broad vision for Bridgeport's schools that focuses on improving school climate, student academics and student behavioral health
- Seek views of all stakeholders, particularly parents and students, in developing your vision
- Present your vision and a plan to accomplish it to the Board of Education for adoption and to parents, students and the wider community
- Build in accountability by defining goals, objectives and timetables by which progress can be measured and monitored
- Keep the Board of Education, school staff, parents and the community informed about progress

Improve the Strategic Planning Structure

- Expand district strategic planning teams to include parents, students and community leaders
- Redesign the school improvement planning process to actively include parents and teachers
- Complete school-by-school assessments; identify strengths at individual schools and in current programs; expand successful initiatives across the district; aggressively address weaknesses

Strengthen School Leadership

- Mobilize the passion and commitment of every principal and teacher to improve the learning of every student
- Develop strong, effective principals in every school
- Foster regular, ongoing communication and collaboration among principals where successes and difficulties can be discussed openly in a supportive environment
- Help all teachers develop strong classroom management skills
- Promote successful School Leadership Teams at every school involving parents, students and community organizations

Find and Focus Resources

- Provide additional resources and supports to Bridgeport's most troubled schools
- Provide more clinical support to deal with issues that underlie students' behavioral problems
- Provide the resources and support to expand the PBIS and PATHS programs throughout the district
- Improve the integration of 9th graders into high school

A very special thanks to the Charter Oak Challenge Foundation for its support for this report.

BRIDGEPORT CHILD ADVOCACY COALITION

2470 Fairfield Avenue, Bridgeport, CT 06605 • (203) 549-0075 • FAX (203) 549-0203 • www.bcacct.org

Chairwoman: Rae A. Sharp

Violence Prevention Task Force Co-Chairs: Lynne Raymond and Gina Simpson

Executive Director: Marilyn Ondrasik

