



FOR EMBARGOED RELEASE:
Wednesday, June 4, 2008, NOON

CONTACT:
Adriana Bobinchock
617.855.2110
bobinca@mcleanpo.mclean.org

Strong Student Connection to School Community and its Staff Are Key to Preventing Violence, says McLean Hospital Researcher

BELMONT, MASS.—In a report issued today by McLean Hospital, the United States Secret Service and the United States Department of Education, researchers note that creating a positive school climate in which students believe the school staff genuinely wants to hear from them about threats or possible attacks is critical to preventing future Columbine-like school violence.

The 15-page report “Prior Knowledge of Potential School-Based Violence: Information Students Learn May Prevent a Targeted Attack,” available at www.secretservice.gov and www.mclean.harvard.edu, outlines the results of multiple interviews of bystanders to violent school attacks to determine how students with prior knowledge of school violence made decisions regarding what steps, if any, to take after learning the information.

“In previous work from the Safe School Initiative we examined school attacks and what could be done to prevent them, and found that in 81 percent of the incidents, someone knew about the violence before it occurred,” said William Pollack, PhD, director for the Centers for Men and Young Men at McLean Hospital and lead author of this latest report. “That led us to question why some children with prior knowledge, whom we identify as ‘bystanders,’ chose to tell an adult, while others did not.”

Pollack, along with colleagues William Modzeleski, of the U.S. Department of Education, and Georgeann Rooney, of the U.S. Secret Service, conducted interviews with 15 bystanders, representing eight school locations nationwide, including Lake Worth Middle School (Florida), Thurston High School (Oregon) and New Bedford High School (Massachusetts). Of those interviewed, six had prior knowledge of a potential threat and chose to tell an adult about the plan. Nine had prior knowledge of a potential threat and chose not to tell authorities. No culpable perpetrators of the school attacks participated in the study.

“We found that school climate affected whether bystanders came forward with information,” said Pollack, assistant clinical professor at Harvard Medical School. “If the bystanders felt that there were trustworthy adults within the school community who would take them seriously and with whom they had a prior helpful relationship, they were inclined to come forward. On the

other hand, without a collegial environment, bystanders chose to remain silent and in every case, a school shooting occurred.”

Although the study is exploratory, Pollack and his colleagues believe identifying school climate as a key factor in averting violence is a significant finding. According to the report, the top reason for students failing to come forward with information was an anticipated negative response from the school.

“One student who knew of a weapon on school property was reluctant to say anything because as he put it, ‘When you say something, you get in trouble or interrogated by teachers,’ said Pollack.

In addition to encouraging a climate change, the investigators are calling for school districts nationwide to develop policies that address the many aspects of reporting a threat. Policies should include encouraging the entire community to report all apparent threats or threatening or disturbing behaviors; provide several options for reporting of threats, including doing so anonymously; and ensuring that all those who report a threat will be treated with respect and that the information they provide will be closely guarded.

Pollack added that teachers and other school faculty should be trained on how to respond properly to students who provide information about potential acts of violence.

In one bystander interview, Peter*, said that he was concerned about a possible violent attack at school and sought the advice of an adult, who told him that he “didn’t need to tell anyone about his concerns.”

“Unfortunately, Peter accepted the adult’s advice and the next day, he was a witness to a school shooting that left a number of people dead,” said Pollack. “The guilt that he experienced was palpable during the interview.”

“People died and I could have done something about it,” Peter told the investigators. To other students he offered, “Don’t take it [such threats or jokes about potential violence] lightly. Come to me or an adult, before it’s too late.”

“It is imperative that schools educate their staff to be open and honest with students and to create trusting bonds. Developing meaningful social and emotional connections with students and creating a climate of mutual respect, not fear, is essential to keeping schools safe,” noted Pollack.

McLean Hospital is the largest psychiatric clinical care, teaching and research facility of Harvard Medical School, an affiliate of Massachusetts General Hospital and a member of Partners HealthCare.

###

**Pseudonym used to protect identity.*