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**COLLEGE OF EDUCATION
& HUMAN DEVELOPMENT**
Selected News Releases

**Study Looks at Maine Principals' Experiences
with Challenging Behaviors in Schools**

PORTLAND, Maine -- Maine schools are encountering a variety of challenging behaviors by students and are using a number of strategies to address the problems, according to a study tapping the experiences of 33 elementary and high school principals. While the interventions are effective with most students, the serious needs and behaviors of a small group far exceed schools' ability and resources, according to researchers at the University of Maine's College of Education and Human Development.

The study, conducted over the past year, also reflects the importance and effectiveness of parental involvement in developing, supporting and evaluating behavioral intervention and prevention strategies. But the degree to which schools are able to rely on parental support varies. In some incidents, parents are as frustrated and unable as the schools to cope with the behavior of their children.

The report, "Principals' Perspectives on Challenging Behaviors in Maine Schools," is based on interviews with 20 principals from different configurations of K-8 schools; four from grade 5-8 schools; and nine principals of either grades 7-12 or 9-12 schools. Sponsored by the UMaine-Maine Principals' Association Research Partnership, the report was presented and discussed November 20 at a seminar on challenging behaviors held in conjunction with the Maine Principals' Association's annual fall conference in Portland.

"We now have an idea of the major behavioral issues being exhibited in Maine schools," says lead author Jim Artesani, assistant professor of special education. The report documents that there is a group of students out there, 2-5 percent in any given school, who seem impervious to all efforts and with needs so complex that any effective intervention requires the involvement of communities and service agencies, according to Artesani. "It's common with what we see in the national literature," he says.

Principals described behaviors that fall into three major categories -- Defiant, which includes non-compliance with rules, insubordination, disrespect, resistance and refusal; Aggressive, which physically hurts another individual, such as fighting, throwing objects, kicking, assaulting and ripping things off walls; and Harassment, such as name calling, verbal and physical intimidation and bullying. The principals noted that fighting is often a result of verbal and physical harassment that took place earlier.

The report documents that most schools are trying to manage problem behavior with existing personnel, with teachers as the first line of defense, particularly those with specific training in crisis intervention or behavioral programming. Schools are also drawing upon a wide array of resources,

including other in-house personnel such as special education and guidance staff, educational technicians and social workers, as well as outside specialists, parents and peers to help develop appropriate interventions and support services.

Encouraging the development of pro-social skills has always been a natural, informal part of what schools do, according to UMaine Professor Walter Harris, a specialist in behavioral disorders who also worked on the report. "Principals and teachers are beginning to realize that this previously hidden curriculum needs to become an explicit, visible, well-planned part of a school's overall mission and expectations that represent community values," Harris says. "Some schools are beginning to address this task, but many are reluctant to do so, believing that values and social behaviors are the exclusive province of home and family."

Teaching pro-social behaviors based on community values is not a complex matter, according to Harris, but it requires community support and sustained attention and commitment from teachers and administrators.

Schools can set boundaries, teach appropriate behaviors and develop programs to help kids, but schools aren't social service agencies, Artesani points out. Serious behaviors are caused by long-standing, complex factors and it takes time and resources far beyond the schools' capacity to tackle these problems.

Artesani emphasizes that communities need to know what schools are coping with in terms of student behavior. "Kids should not have to be shot to grab the headlines," he says. "The fact that they are getting into fights, being defiant and harassing one another and teachers should be enough to get public attention and helpful response."

Among other findings in the report:

- Challenging behavior is more evident in males than females, particularly the serious behaviors, such as physical aggression.
- There was little distinction between regular and special education students in exhibiting challenging behaviors.
- An encouraging number of schools are using programs that build the capacity of students and staff to effectively manage challenging behaviors, such as social skills curricula, peer mediation, anger management, advisory teams and various types of staff training.
- Principals also experience the frustration of parents whose children do not pose behavioral problems. Some of these parents don't think schools are doing enough to control the situation, and they want the disruptive kids out of the school.
- Principals consider their own roles as critical and appear to feel to a significant extent that challenging behaviors are their responsibility.
- Principals consistently expressed the crucial role of parental involvement in dealing with behavioral issues. But they also feel that parents and home circumstances can undermine school

attempts to address serious problems. They express frustration, but also an understanding of the larger issues involved, such as mental health problems, physical, sexual and psychological abuse, poverty and lack of social skills.

School may be more successful than they realize in addressing most challenging behaviors, says Artesani. They generally seem able to access well-trained staff, consultants and strategies that are working with most students. But the inability to reach that small group of students engaging in serious and disruptive behavior, combined with the lack of family and community effort to support effective programming and monitoring can overshadow progress with less intense problems.

Among other recommendations, the researchers suggest that schools:

- Conduct a systematic evaluation of challenging behaviors in individual schools.
- Clarify school and parental expectations around behavior.
- Develop a set of schoolwide values concerning student behavior and principles upon which rules can be developed.
- Develop a schoolwide discipline plan in conjunction with community agencies.
- Develop a statewide web page on the issue, with links to other related pages and a bulletin board for posting information and posing questions.
- Develop working relationships with parents prior to the advent of behavioral problems.

The Maine Principals' Association's Professional Executive Committee has also received recommendations from the ad hoc committee it established in May 1997 to study student behavioral problems. The Ad Hoc Committee on Challenging Behaviors in Schools has drafted recommendations for consideration by legislators, educational policymakers and schools. Suggested actions range from greater collaboration and sharing of critical information among agencies dealing with youth at risk to comprehensive pre-kindergarten- grade 12 prevention programming, including components such as diversity, tolerance, conflict resolution and alcohol and drug abuse education.

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