

Child Protection in Schools

Brader Brathwaite

The concept of School Safety Zones is becoming increasingly popular, forged from the need to create a legally designated, identifiable physical space around schools, where integrated services can be brought to bear on students' well-being. Various education systems have been incorporating novel safety features that adequately meet their needs.

A Safety Zone partnership was recently launched in Pittsburg, USA, as a joint responsibility of the public school system, the city, the county, the parents, community organisations, and corporate agencies. Their safety zone is a 1,000 ft radius around school buildings, within which the partners monitor issues that impact on the students' full protection: crime, abandoned building and cars, dumping, overgrown lots, cracked steps and sidewalks, homelessness, and traffic.

In 2004, Ireland launched its first School Safety Zone, with an emphasis on safer travel around schools. They looked into reducing the car trips made by both children and parents. This was intended to (a) engage students in physical activity by walking to school, (b) improve air quality by lessening exhaust fumes, and (c) ease fuel costs for parents.

In Kenya, the concept of School Safety Zones incorporates safe, protected buildings, with due consideration for the health and quality education of students. To date, their project, sponsored by the Church World Service, has produced safety manuals for schools, fenced schools, improved toilet and sanitary facilities, instituted programmes for orphans and vulnerable children, and improved student performance, while also influencing educational policy and legislation.

The Church World Service, a Protestant, international, humanitarian organisation, exemplifies a service that can be provided by the denominational school boards in Trinidad and Tobago. Interestingly, the project in Kenya extends beyond a single period of religious instruction for students as in our secondary schools.

These attempts at mobilizing communities of partners seek to have lasting effects. In our system, such features would broaden the current contributions of Parent-Teachers' Associations (PTAs), especially those that concentrate primarily on fund-raising activities. The PTAs, denominational boards, corporate agencies, and NGOs have been supporting the work of our schools, and many agencies sponsor aspects of sports days, graduation exercises, essay competitions, and so on. However, a comprehensive programme that affords students a harmless passage through the school system, especially during the stormy adolescent years, would be extremely beneficial in these times. If all the efforts were one combined effort, what a great effort that would be!

Drawing from my experience, our Safety Zones could also address teachers' well-being. Some time ago, while listening to an audio-taped lesson, I noticed that the teacher raised

her voice whenever a bus sped by on the Bus Route. Years later, she took early retirement for a polyp on her throat!

On a recent project, a woman police officer described a situation in which a pseudo-parent visited a school ostensibly to take girls for health checks, whereas the girls were to provide sexual services for waiting clients.

Embarrassing situations related to legal visitations exist where parents involve the school by undertaking visitation at and from the school setting, sometimes seeking children at times when visitations have not been sanctioned.

We can readily agree that programmes developed for one school system should not be transferred wholesale into the culture of another. However, by using a similar template we could research and address the specific areas that impact the zones around our schools and, by extension, the comfort and security of students in our schools. If a radius of 1,000 feet takes us into neighbouring yards, then, we may limit or expand our space, conferring a role for neighbours. Next, we ought to screen the community agencies that would welcome responsibility for partnerships with schools.

A home-grown model for partnership with the school system is not alien. A National Alcohol and Drug Abuse Prevention Programme (NADAPP) project once developed a curriculum for substance abuse prevention in schools, studying five locations with distinct characteristics of substance use in Trinidad and Tobago. Police, social workers, teachers, representatives from community-based organizations and NGOs, and legal minds met to structure supporting policy and the curriculum. A bar in a school's vicinity became a no-no!

We should be confident that as School Safety Zones catch on in Trinidad and Tobago, partners would readily detect the mix that each school should emphasise in specific zones. Technology could be effectively utilized, with safety officers maintaining electronic surveillance of zone activities, or maintaining digital photographs, on record, of guardians/parents whose children we shelter.

School of Education, UWI, St. Augustine