



## SCHOOL VIOLENCE PREVENTION DEMONSTRATION PROGRAM



Center for Civic Education

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Robert Wheeler, Principal, Cleveland Elementary

Betty Shankweiler, Principal, Lehigh Parkway Elementary

Marybeth Kornfeind-Ralston, Principal, Jackson Elementary

Teachers and staff of the Allentown School District

All the parents and students of the Allentown School District

# **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program**

## **School Climate Study (2006-7)**

**Ritter Elementary School**

**Allentown, Pennsylvania**

**March 11, 2008**

**Submitted to  
Center for Civic Education  
School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program  
Maria Gallo, Director**

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## Executive Summary

This is school climate study of the Center for Civic Education's **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program** at Ritter Elementary School in Allentown, Pennsylvania for the academic year 2006-7. Ritter, like most of Allentown's schools, is a majority-minority school. Hispanic, African American, Middle Eastern, and immigrant students outnumber white students, and most students come from working class or poor families. There are significant academic achievement gaps between economically disadvantaged and non-economically disadvantaged students. But regardless of their backgrounds, all students are learning to be active citizens through the **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program**, especially those in high implementation classrooms.

Ritter understands that one of its major purposes is to develop the next generation of American citizens. The school operates on the assumption that students are more likely to succeed in life if they are civically engaged. Through Ritter's **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program**, students are learning that they need to master knowledge, skills, and develop certain kinds of attitudes to address public problems and be active citizens. They also are learning that public institutions are likely to work better when citizens participate in public life. These are important and valuable lessons, and Ritter understands they are best learned when young.

Throughout the Allentown School District and at Ritter Elementary School, there is a positive correlation between higher levels of classroom implementation of the **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program** and higher achievement levels on Pennsylvania standardized tests. This is a significant conclusion. The program helps elementary school students master comprehension, reading, and analysis skills. The more involved students are in the program at all grade levels, the better they master these skills as measured on standardized tests.

As part of the school climate study, Dr. Sokolow conducted three focus groups with parents, two focus groups with Ritter students, and two focus groups with Ritter teachers. Their comments are summarized below.

### Teachers:

- The program has helped them teach social studies more effectively.
- The program has had a positive impact on their knowledge of American history and government.
- The program has helped students understand the concept of authority and take their work seriously.
- They believed that the program "makes our school stronger" by fostering a common purpose.

### Students:

When asked what they had learned, students were very specific. According to them, these are the most important concepts they have learned in the program:

- You have to share and respect.
- No bullying is important. You should not kick, hit, or punch.

- Justice is important because it is about fairness and kindness.
- Privacy means that you do not invade others' privacy.
- Responsibility means you get your priorities straight.
- Responsibility means follow through with what you promise to do, like a contract.
- Responsibility means there are consequences and benefits to being responsible.
- Privacy is when you keep things to yourself.
- Government is designed to keep order and make rules.
- Authority is needed, especially your mother and father.

When asked about the impact of the program, students said that they have learned to “share your stuff,” “say thank you and you say you’re welcome,” and respect the privacy of others. One student said that if “I get mad at my friends, I control my anger more because of social studies.” Students believed that the program had helped them develop better relations with their teachers, family, and friends through greater self-control and respect.

### **Parents:**

Parents were happy that the program had encouraged their children to respect their teachers and make positive comments about them. The program has taught their children to help resolve arguments and conflicts without fighting immediately. They were pleased that their children were proud of Ritter and acted responsibly on school property. Few of the parents are aware that the **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program** is a special program. Most of them equate it with the standard social curriculum.

### **Ritter School Climate**

School staff and students take ownership of Ritter’s school appearance. There is no litter in school or on school grounds. Graffiti is rare because students feel some sense of ownership of the school, and if graffiti appears on the outside of the building, it is cleaned up quickly.

At Ritter Elementary School, faculty relations are very good, and the **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program** has played an important role in fostering collegial behavior. The program has promoted good interpersonal relations among teachers and helped create a professional community with shared norms and practices.

The **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program** has provided a solid and usable framework for students. From kindergarten upward, all students share a common vocabulary and a common understanding of authority, privacy, responsibility, and justice. As a result, students treat each other respectfully because everyone has the same expectations about what constitutes proper behavior.

Students feel a sense of community and the idea of school is defined as a warm, affectionate regard for everyone in the building. The various racial and ethnic groups at Ritter blend and interrelate. They all act as if they are full members of the school community. Students understand what it means to be a responsible person and a good citizen, and they know that their understanding is shared by teachers and administrators.

Ritter Elementary School is unusual in that principal Ms. Melissa Marcks taught in the **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program** and served as a trainer before becoming principal. As a result, she has a superb understanding of the program and is deeply committed to it. This is a key element in the success of the program at Ritter.

The **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program** is an effective citizenship program at Ritter because the curriculum has these characteristics:

- Realistic content and a balanced, nonpartisan treatment of issues, controversies, and problems.
- A combination of important dates, facts, people, and events along with ideas, values, and principles of democracy.
- The use of community resources to enrich classroom instruction and learning and connect students to the world outside their classrooms.
- Engaging teaching strategies that focus on (1) class discussions; (2) effective questioning strategies; (3) small-group learning; (4) role-playing and debating; and (5) two culminating activities – the mock Congressional hearing and the public policy portfolio.

In the program, teachers eschewed lecturing and discussed subject matter with their students. Classroom lessons actively involved students. Several teachers were quite adept at encouraging students to react to other students' responses, and all of them called on non-volunteers as well as volunteers.

At Ritter, students are being educated to believe that civic and political participation can improve their neighborhoods, city, and nation. And just as importantly, they are learning the knowledge and skills to be effectively engaged.

The **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program**, funded through a grant from the US Department of Education, began in 1999 with middle school students in seven large urban school districts. Since then, it has expanded to encompass elementary and high school students in urban, rural, suburban, and Native American school districts in Hawaii, Alaska, and the continental United States. School districts volunteer to participate in the program. They receive textbooks, teacher guides, supplementary materials, training, and ongoing assistance from the Center along with modest financial support. This program is compatible with No Child Left Behind Act.

This is a prevention program, not an intervention program. The **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program** focuses on academic study and cooperative learning activities that promote increased knowledge and skills and the disposition to become engaged citizens. A major premise of this program is that academic success will promote greater civic responsibility by providing students with the knowledge, tools, attitudes, and confidence they need to participate in a democratic society. Throughout the year, there are formal professional development activities for teachers involved in the program to improve their ability to use the curriculum effectively. And students in the program must complete two simulations: a mock Congressional hearing and a portfolio about a public policy problem.



## 1. Introduction and Overview

This is a school climate study of the Center for Civic Education's **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program** at Ritter Elementary School in Allentown, Pennsylvania. The Center, located in Calabasas, California, is a nonprofit education corporation that has developed civic education programs since 1964. The mission of the Center is to promote informed, responsible participation in civic life by citizens committed to the values and principles of American democracy. Today, the Center directs a broad array of curricular, teacher-training, professional development, school curricula, and community-based programs. The Center's programs have reached more than 28 million students and over 90,000 teachers in the United States.

The major goal of the Center is to help students (1) increase their understanding of the institutions of American democracy; (2) develop the skills necessary to actively participate in civic life as effective and responsible citizens; and (3) use democratic procedures to make decisions and manage conflict and disagreement. Internationally, the Center is directing civic education programs in more than 70 countries in Asia, Africa, Europe, and Latin America. The Center has received many awards along with national and international recognition for its nonpartisan civic education programs.

The **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program**, funded through a grant from the US Department of Education, began in 1999 with middle school students in seven large urban school districts. Since then, it has expanded to encompass elementary and high school students in urban, rural, suburban, and Native American school districts in Hawaii, Alaska, and the continental United States. School districts volunteer to participate in the program. They receive textbooks, teacher guides, supplementary materials, training, and ongoing assistance from the Center along with modest financial support.

This is a prevention program, not an intervention program. Many school violence intervention programs around the country focus on strategies such as teen courts, tutoring, or peer mediation. The **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program**, in contrast, focuses on academic study and cooperative learning activities that promote increased knowledge and skills and the disposition to become engaged citizens. A major premise of this program is that academic success will promote greater civic responsibility by providing students with the knowledge, tools, attitudes, and confidence they need to participate in a democratic society.

## 2. Description of Program

School violence is a challenge to American democracy, for schools must prevent violence while helping educate young people to understand their heritage and their rights and responsibilities as citizens. School systems have developed a wide variety of strategies to counter school violence, ranging from involving the whole school in violence prevention to peer mediation to literacy tutoring projects. The Center's **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program** is unusual in that it addresses the problem of school violence through (1) the systematic study of American civics in elementary, middle, and high school; and (2) the development of school-based projects that promote responsible citizenship in the students' schools and communities.

The **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program** has four core principles of civic education instruction. First, it encourages interactive and cooperative learning by students through small group work, simulations, role-playing, public presentations, and Congressional hearings and moot courts. Second, the treatment of political and constitutional issues is both realistic and fair. The curriculum balances respect for our political and legal systems with a nonpartisan and constructive analysis of its application, achievements, and flaws. Third, the curriculum uses the community as a classroom resource to add knowledge, credibility, and reality to the study of democracy in America. And fourth, the program depends on strong support by school principals and other administrators.

The **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program** actively involves students in the learning process in ways that reflect respect for them as citizens and serious learners. The curriculum tries to promote reflection, deliberation, and the acquisition of essential knowledge about our history and political system as a prelude to responsible citizenship. This is what differentiates the **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program** from many other violence prevention programs in the country. It focuses on giving students the knowledge, skills, and attitudes they will need to act responsibly both inside and outside of school.

The **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program** uses three curricula as participatory citizenship core study materials. *Foundations of Democracy: Authority, Privacy, Responsibility, and Justice* analyzes four fundamental concepts of politics and government. There are elementary, middle, and high school level textbooks. The Authority unit examines the nature of authority and its scope and limitations. Privacy discusses the benefits and costs of privacy in a free society. Responsibility helps students understand the importance of personal responsibility. Finally, Justice analyzes the nature of justice and three common versions of it – distributive, corrective, and procedural. This is a K-12 curriculum.

*We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution* is available at three skill different levels. It focuses on essential concepts and fundamental values of the United States Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Its five elementary school units cover the following topics: (1) philosophical and historical foundations of the American political system; (2) the framers and the Constitution; (3) the impact of the Constitution on American institutions and practices; (4) the Bill of Rights; and (5) the role of citizens in American democracy. There is a sixth unit for middle and high school students about rights.

*We the People: Project Citizen* promotes informed and responsible participation in civic affairs. Through a grade-appropriate sequential process, it actively engages students in learning how to identify, analyze, monitor, and influence public policy. Its six steps are: (1) identify public policy problems in your community; (2) select a problem for class study; (3) gather information about the problem; (4) develop a class portfolio – explain the problem, examine alternative policies, propose a public policy, and develop an action plan; (5) present your portfolio; and (6) reflect on your learning experience.

The portfolio displays the class's work and proposes a solution and implementation plan. Depending on the nature of the problem, the class may present its findings to a school board, city council, or other government bodies.

There are two additional elements to the **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program**. Throughout the year, there are formal professional development activities for teachers involved in the program to improve their ability to use the curriculum effectively. And students in the program must complete two simulations: a mock Congressional hearing and a portfolio about a public policy problem.

One of the most unusual features of the Center's **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program** is the inclusion of native sites in Hawaii, Alaska, and the continental United States. In Alaska and the continental United States, some of these native or tribal school districts are located on reservations and thus are part of tribal governments. Because of their unique histories and cultures, program curricular materials may be modified so that they can be integrated into the curriculum.

The Allentown School District has been involved in the **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program** since the 2001-2 academic year.

### **3. Methodology of the School Climate Study**

Since 1999, the Center for Civic Education has been directing a **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program** funded by the US Department of Education in urban, suburban, rural, and Native school districts throughout the country, including Alaska and Hawaii. This program has been evaluated through pre- and post-content and attitudinal tests, reports, and occasional site visits. In 2006, the Center for Civic Education reached an agreement with the Allentown School District in Allentown, Pennsylvania to do a school climate study at Ritter Elementary School.

Ritter was chosen because it had a very good reputation at the Center for the implementation of its **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program**. Federal Judge Marjorie O. Rendell, the First Lady of Pennsylvania and a tireless advocate of civic education, has visited Ritter twice to honor this school for its civic education program. In addition, students from Ritter made a powerful and inspiring presentation at the Third Annual Congressional Conference on Civic Education, which was co-sponsored by the Center. Myron Yoder, Allentown School District's social studies supervisor and the co-coordinator of the site program, invited the Center to use Ritter Elementary School as the site for a climate study. Finally, the research of Ms. Diane Holben, the Director of Evaluation and Accountability for the Allentown School District, encouraged the Center for Civic Education to undertake a climate study of Ritter Elementary School.



**Federal Judge Marjorie O. Rendell, the First Lady of Pennsylvania and a strong advocate of civic education, visited Ritter Elementary School twice to honor the school for its civic education program.**

Dr. Sokolow began his climate study by reviewing some of the voluminous literature on this subject, especially in the area of civic education. Based on this literature review and on conversations with Ms. Maria Gallo, the Director of the **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program**, Dr. Sokolow visited Ritter Elementary School from December through June of 2006-7. He also visited three other Allentown elementary schools to observe the program: Lehigh Park, Jackson, and Cleveland.

Over a seven-month period, Dr. Sokolow:

- Observed over 45 classes in four elementary schools with a focus on Ritter Elementary School.
- Observed one mock Congressional hearing; an orientation to the program for elementary guidance counselors; a program enrichment activity at the Lehigh Valley Historical Society; and several culminating activities.
- Met face-to-face with Allentown's superintendent, assistant superintendent, other school administrators, and the director of evaluation and accountability.
- Met face-to-face with four principals and over 50 teachers.
- Talked with many students in different grades about the program.
- Taught three elementary school classes about the program and students' projects.
- Reviewed and analyzed data on the academic performance of Allentown public school elementary school students.

- Directed focus groups about the **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program** with parents, students, and teachers.

Administrators, teachers, and students were extremely cooperative and gracious throughout the research period, and they were eager to facilitate this study.

#### **4. Allentown School District and Ritter Elementary School**

Ritter Elementary School is located at 740 North Plymouth Street in Allentown, Pennsylvania, the third largest city in Pennsylvania with a population of 106,632 according to the 2000 census. It is the county seat of Lehigh County, located about 60 miles northwest of Philadelphia.

In the mid-eighteenth century, Allentown was populated primarily by Pennsylvania Dutch farmers and craftsmen. By 1810, it was in the heart of the greatest grain-producing region in the new nation. By the mid-nineteenth century, the Lehigh Valley had become the most industrialized region of the country due to the development of the local iron industry. By the early twentieth century, Allentown's iron industry had been augmented by silk mills and a diverse economy that produced everything from furniture to cigars.

Since World War II, Allentown has undergone yet another transition. Faced with the decline of manufacturing and the rise of a service economy, Allentown is struggling to attract businesses and keep its middle class. The city now contains large numbers of working-class and poor Hispanics and immigrants and faces an uncertain economic future as many former residents and local businesses have relocated elsewhere in the Lehigh Valley.

The Allentown School District is the fourth largest of the 501 school districts in Pennsylvania. It educates approximately 18,000 students in 23 educational facilities. Seventy percent of students qualify for free or reduced lunches. Sixteen percent of students are in ESOL programs (English Speakers of Other Languages). Per pupil expenditures are among the lowest in the state due to a declining tax base.

Allentown has a growing student body that comes from Philadelphia and New York City, particularly the Bronx. There are also large numbers of new students from Puerto Rico and Central and South America. In addition, there is a large Middle Eastern population and Eastern European and Russian students are increasing in number. Currently, the Allentown School District is a majority/minority district, meaning that minority students outnumber the majority students as defined by the US government. The Allentown School District has students from 41 countries speaking 21 languages.

The Allentown School District confronts serious challenges on a daily basis. There has been an influx of poor and special education students into the schools. Allentown's dwindling middle class continues to leave the city. In addition, there has been no local revenue growth while there have been significant increases in medical insurance and other school expenses. Finally, funding for the Empowerment Plan is not guaranteed. Like many older manufacturing cities, Allentown faces an uncertain future.

Ritter Elementary School had approximately 560 students from kindergarten through fifth grade in 2006-7. It is surrounded by a modest but well-kept neighborhood. The school is a two-story brick, rectangular building that was constructed in 1910. Classrooms hug the outside of the building in a classic U-shape. The center of the school contains a gym/assembly hall with a stage. Adjacent to it is the cafeteria. In back of the school are several portable classrooms and a large grassy playground with a baseball field and basketball courts.



**Ritter Elementary School as sketched by an Allentown resident.**

At Ritter, 45.5 percent of all students receive free and reduced lunches and 37.3 percent of its students are classified as low-income. The student/teacher ratio is 18:1. Last year, it had a 95.8 percent attendance rate, which exceeds the District's average attendance rate. Ritter is a majority-minority school. The major racial/ethnic groups are Hispanic (43 percent) and African-American (14 percent).

The No Child Left Behind Act requires that all students reach proficiency in reading and mathematics. For a school to make Adequate Yearly Progress, it must meet certain standards for school attendance, test proficiency, and the percent of students taking certain tests. The Allentown School District has been classified in the corrective action category of No Child Left Behind, but Ritter Elementary School met the standards of Adequate Yearly Progress in 2006-7.

In 1999, Pennsylvania adopted academic standards for reading, writing, speaking and listening, and mathematics that identify what a student should know and be able to do at various grade levels as measured by the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA). School students are divided into four groups: below basic, basic, proficient, and advanced. The state baseline for proficient and above is 45 percent for reading and 35 percent for mathematics. The tables below show Ritter Elementary School's assessment results in 2002. These are the most recent statistics from the State of Pennsylvania posted on the Pennsylvania Department of Education's Web site.

They compare test scores from Ritter Elementary School with test scores from Allentown and the state of Pennsylvania for grade 5.

**Table 1: Ritter Elementary School in Comparison to Allentown and Pennsylvania: Mathematics, Grade 5**

Category	Below Basic	Basic	Proficient	Advanced
Ritter	18%	23%	35%	24%
Allentown	40%	23%	20%	18%
Pennsylvania	25%	22%	27%	26%

**Table 2: Ritter Elementary School in Comparison to Allentown and Pennsylvania: Reading, Grade 5**

Category	Below Basic	Basic	Proficient	Advanced
Ritter	15%	29%	37%	20%
Allentown	36%	26%	27%	11%
Pennsylvania	20%	23%	39%	18%

**Table 3: Ritter Elementary School Grade 5 Test Breakdown by Race and Socioeconomic Status\* (N=82)**

Category	Below Basic	Basic	Proficient	Advanced
White	9.5%	23.8%	35.7%	31%
Latino-Hispanic	31.8%	31.8%	27.3%	9.1%
Economically Disadvantaged				
Yes	18.8%	37.5%	35.4%	8.3%
No	8.8%	17.6%	38.2%	35.3%

\* No scores were reported for Blacks or Asians because the number of students was less than 10.

At Ritter Elementary School, there are significant differences in statewide test scores depending on students' ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Whites did considerably better than Hispanics, and over 70 percent of non-economically disadvantaged students scored at proficient or advanced in comparison to more than half of economically disadvantaged students who scored at basic or below basic levels.

In 2006-7, 61.2 percent of Ritter's students scored at the proficient level in reading on the PSSA test, third highest among all Allentown elementary schools. In mathematics, 74.8 percent of Ritter students scored at the proficient level on the PSSA test, fourth highest among all Allentown elementary schools. Ritter met Adequate Yearly Progress targets in mathematics five years in a row and exceeded the targets both in mathematics and reading. The tables below show Ritter's scores in mathematics and reading on the advanced level from 2003 through 2007.

**Table 4: PSSA Advanced Target Scores and Levels at Ritter, 2003-7**

Year	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
<b>Mathematics</b>					
<b>Target Score</b>	35	35	45	45	45
<b>Actual Score</b>	67.5	77	74.6	74.6	74.8
<b>Reading</b>					
<b>Target Score</b>	45	45	54	54	54
<b>Actual Score</b>	62.8	61.8	57.2	59.8	61.2

In Allentown, 10 elementary schools met the standards of Adequate Yearly Progress in 2006-7. Ritter Elementary School was among this group.

## 5. Test Results

In 2006, the Allentown School District examined the impact of the **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program** on student literacy as measured by the PSSA. The study, which was undertaken by Ms. Diane Holben, the Director of Evaluation and Accountability for the Allentown School District, posed two questions:

- Are there significant differences in PSSA test scores in literacy based on the following levels of program implementation for grades 3, 4, and 5?
  - **None:** program was not used in the classroom.
  - **Low:** program was used, but neither of the culminating projects was completed.
  - **Moderate** (grade 5 only): program was used and one culminating project was completed.
  - **High:** program was used, and students completed the mock Congressional hearing and the public policy portfolio.
- Are there significant differences in the scores on the reading subskills of Comprehension and Reading Skills (Anchor A) and the Interpretation and Analysis of Fiction and Non-Fiction Texts (Anchor B) for grades 3, 4, and 5 based on the level of program implementation?

Table 5 shows the following numbers of students in grades 3, 4, and 5 involved in this evaluation during the academic year 2005-6. All of the following tables are based on data gathered by the Allentown School District.

**Table 5: Number of Students by Grade and Level of Implementation, Allentown 2005-6**

Grade	None	Low	Moderate	High
3	43	888	--	354
4	8	544	--	548
5	--	394	683	114



Table 6 shows the comparison of PSSA Reading Anchor A raw scores by level of implementation throughout Allentown.

**Table 6: PSSA Anchor A Raw Scores, Allentown, 2005-6**

Grade	None	Low	Moderate	High
3	17	22.25	--	24.40
4	12	18.90	--	20.65
5	--	21.64	23.05	26.24

Table 7 shows the comparison of PSSA Reading Anchor B raw scores by level of implementation throughout Allentown.

**Table 7: PSSA Anchor B Raw Scores, Allentown 2005-6**

Grade	None	Low	Moderate	High
3	4.49	6.32	--	6.91
4	6.50	7.98	--	8.47
5	--	7.57	8.02	8.97

Table 8 shows the comparison of PSSA Reading scaled scores by level of implementation throughout Allentown.

**Table 8: PSSA Reading Scaled Scores, 2005-6**

Grade	None	Low	Moderate	High
3	1046	1204	--	1271
4	1024	1208	--	1253
5	--	1174	1220	1313

The results are very clear. In all three grades, there was a significant difference among implementation groups. The low implementation group had higher scores than students who were not in the program. In grade 5, the moderate implementation group had a higher score than the low implementation group. And in all three grades, the high implementation group scored significantly higher than the other three groups.

The differences in raw scores are educationally significant because each point in the raw score adds an average of about 15 scaled score points to the refined scores. In all three grades, the mean score for the high implementation group exceeded the score considered by the state of Pennsylvania to be “proficient” in reading.

Even though the test results are very clear, there may not be a direct cause and effect relationship between student scores and levels of implementation. While there is a correlation between higher average test scores and higher levels of implementation, correlation does not prove causality. It is possible that the most highly effective teachers choose to implement the program more fully than their colleagues. On the other hand, it also is possible that the program helps teachers of varied abilities to better teach the kinds of skills that are tested on the PSSA test. The data strongly indicates that higher test scores are the result of higher levels of implementation.

Dr. Sokolow asked Ms. Diane Holben to do a similar analysis for students at Ritter Elementary School. Students were divided into the same implementation categories – none, low, moderate,

and high – from kindergarten through fifth grade. Her analysis correlated grades and implementation levels with two measures. The DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills) is a set of standardized, individually administered measures of early literacy development that are used to assess pre-reading and early reading skills from kindergarten through fifth grade. The other test measure was the PSSA reading test for grades three, four, and five.

Table 9 shows the DIBELS measure by level of implementation at Ritter Elementary School.

**Table 9: DIBELS Analysis at Ritter Elementary School, 2005-6**

Grade	DIBELS Measure	None	Low	Moderate	High
K	Letter Naming Fluency	9.78	--	--	13.66
1	Oral Reading Fluency	37.29	36.84	--	--
2	Oral Reading Fluency	75.41	86.47	--	--
3	Oral Reading Fluency	78.64	78.13	--	105.19
4	Oral Reading Fluency	83.20	--	--	110.18
5	Oral Reading Fluency	--	109.06	--	127.56

Table 10 shows PSSA reading scaled scores by level of implementation at Ritter Elementary School.

**Table 10: PSSA Reading Scaled Scores at Ritter Elementary School, 2005-6**

Grade	None	Low	Moderate	High
3	1046.37	1193.50	--	1318.92
4	1023.88	--	--	1299.21
5	--	1249.32	--	1329.52

The results are very clear. At Ritter Elementary School, there is a direct correlation between the highest test scores and the high implementation classrooms. On the DIBELS analysis, the high implementation groups scored significantly higher than those students not in the program, and in grade five where all students were involved in the program, the high implementation group scored significantly higher than the low implementation group. There are two exceptions to this generalization. The low implementation programs in grades 1 and 3 scored slightly lower than those students who had not participated in the program.

On the PSSA reading scaled scores, in grade three the low implementation group scored higher than those students not in the program, and the high implementation group scored significantly higher than the low group. In grade four, there was only a high implementation group, and it scored higher than those students not in the program. In grade 5, there were no students outside the program, but the high implementation group did significantly better than the only other group tested, the low implementation group.

A limitation of this study at Ritter was that the majority of teachers were in the high implementation group, and that correlation does not prove causality. Nonetheless, differences in test scores are very dramatic. Based on District and Ritter comparisons, there is a positive correlation between higher levels of implementation of the **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program** and higher achievement levels on Pennsylvania standardized tests. This result suggests that higher test scores are the result of higher levels of implementation.

This is significant. Throughout Allentown, it appears that the program helps elementary school students master comprehension, reading, and analysis skills. The more involved students are in the program at all grade levels, the better they master these skills as measured on standardized tests. This generalization certainly applies to the high implementation group at Ritter Elementary School.

## **6. Surveys and Focus Groups**

As part of the school climate study, Dr. Sokolow conducted three focus groups with parents, two focus groups with Ritter students, and two focus groups with Ritter teachers. There were 31 parents involved in the focus groups. All of them had volunteered to participate during the school day. There were 24 students ranging from kindergarten through fifth grade involved in the focus groups. All of them had been chosen by their teachers to participate. Twenty-two teachers participated in one teacher focus group, which was conducted over an hour-and-a-half in the teachers lounge as they ate lunch. Their comments are summarized below. Another eight teachers from around Allentown participated in another focus group held in Pasadena, California, during a 2007 **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program** conference.

### **6.1 Teacher Survey and Questionnaire**

In early June of 2007, a survey and questionnaire developed by Dr. Sokolow was e-mailed to all 30 Ritter teachers by the principal. Teachers received \$30 for completing and returning the survey. Despite this financial incentive, Dr. Sokolow received only seven surveys covering the following grades: kindergarten, first, third, fourth, and fifth. The results are discussed below.

Teachers in the early grades (kindergarten through third grade) liked the program because it was consistent, used a common vocabulary and common concepts from grade to grade, and included good teachers' materials. One teacher also praised the support of Mr. Yoder.

Fourth and fifth grade teachers also liked the spiraling curriculum that started in kindergarten. They considered the program especially effective because every classroom in the school participated. They especially praised the mock Congressional hearing and the public policy portfolio with its emphasis on citizenship. One teacher liked the incorporation of the community into students' learning and the connections the program makes from students' individual experiences to the world around them.

Although all the teachers liked the program very much, they also had suggestions about improving it. A common complaint was that the *We the People* book did not give students enough history, geography, and map skills prior to the study of the Constitution. They recommended either that the book be revised or that teachers insert a unit on early American history into the program prior to discussing the origins of the Constitution.

Others suggested that additional primary sources would be useful and that a scaled-down version of the public policy portfolio would be welcomed by students in the early grades. Finally, several teachers thought that some lessons were repetitive.

Most teachers thought they had enough time to complete the curriculum over an academic year. However, they also pointed out that the social studies curriculum contains other units that must be covered on local, state, and international topics.

All teachers agreed that the **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program** had benefited their students by introducing them to important terms and ideas, by helping them think about and solve problems, and by helping them understand that they have an important role to play in their classrooms, school, and society. Several teachers also believed that the program had helped students understand authority better and take greater responsibility for their own actions. One teacher pointed out that a valuable lesson students learned is that “life is not always fair.” In general, teachers thought that one of the greatest benefits of the program involved helping students understand their rights and responsibilities as citizens.

Teachers also praised the program for its impact on them. One teacher wrote that the program “has taught me how to effectively manage my students and guide them toward a goal.” Another teacher wrote that the program had helped “me to teach the concepts that are important in the life of a small child.” Several teachers believed that the program had broadened their understanding of democracy and the role of citizenship in our society.

Teachers had similar views about the impact of the **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program** on Ritter Elementary School. As one teacher wrote, students “have become empowered as ambassadors of good citizenship in their relationships between fellow students and staff.” Another teacher wrote that our “school has a wonderful feel to it and the program is definitely part of that. The children learn to respect authority and be responsible or suffer the consequences.” They also pointed out that the program related nicely to Allentown School District’s no bullying policy and curriculum.

“There is a sense of community from all staff and students. Students are aware that everyone is on the same page.” According to those surveyed, the program had made Ritter students more aware of themselves as part of a larger community and led to very favorable media attention. All this has made Ritter a prouder and more cohesive elementary school.

The survey included a checklist of 39 statements that were divided into four categories: (1) faculty relations; (2) leadership/decisions; (3) learning assessment; and (4) attitudes and culture. Teachers were asked to respond to these statements by checking one of four boxes that ranged from strongly disagree, disagree, agree, to strongly agree.

On faculty relationships, teachers generally thought that faculty listened to each other and collaborated. They also believed that morale was high among teachers and that they saw themselves as professionals.

Most teachers also believed that the **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program** had a sense of mission that was shared by teachers. Leadership was collegial, caring, and open toward teachers and supported them in the classroom. Several teachers, however, believed that Ritter’s leadership did not fully understand the time constraints teachers were under to cover all the material in social studies.

Teachers had a very positive view of learning and assessment, and believed that the program promoted student achievement and the acquisition of civics-related knowledge. Expectations were high for all students, and teachers and students were committed to academic excellence. Several teachers, however, thought that parents needed to be better informed about their children's progress in social studies on a more regular basis.

Teachers also praised the attitudes and culture that the program fostered. From their perspective, everyone was working toward common goals in social studies.

## **6.2 Teacher Focus Groups**

Teachers overwhelmingly reported that the **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program** had helped them teach social studies more effectively. They praised the common vocabulary that is used from grade to grade and how the curriculum builds on previous knowledge and class work. Teachers thought that students enjoyed the topics, although several of them thought that privacy and justice were difficult for very young students to understand. They also praised the structure of the curriculum and the focus on the Constitution.

Several teachers, however, believed that there should be more history and geography in the curriculum. In the upper elementary grades, students needed to learn about early American history before they could study the Constitution. Prior knowledge was assumed in the program, but it does not exist among their students.

Teachers also thought that the program had a positive impact on their own knowledge of American history and government. They liked learning more about the Constitution. Several teachers conceded that the curriculum made them realize that they needed more training. As one teacher said, "I better understand the technicalities of the terms. I am better informed of the working and legal definitions."

According to the teachers, the **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program** had encouraged them to collaborate more frequently because they all are teaching the same program. As one teacher said, "the dialogue is open." Collaboration was especially strong on the public policy portfolio. Teachers also pointed out that having the entire school involved with the program fostered the accumulation of knowledge and experience and frequent discussions about the curriculum.

Teachers believed that the program has had a positive impact on their relationship with students. When students understood concepts such as authority, respect, and responsibility, they understand teachers' roles better. When students helped develop class rules, they better understand what teachers expect of them. Ritter's behavior plan works better because students and teachers share the same expectations throughout the building.

Teachers praised the principal's leadership in the **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program**. She provided strong support throughout the school year, which encouraged teachers to participate and stay enthused.

Teachers thought that the **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program** had helped their students a great deal. The program had promoted a sense of community. Children understood their roles as students well. They understood the concept of authority and take their work seriously. Students felt empowered by the program and were able to use words such as privacy and responsibility in the classroom and on the playground. The program helps “make them feel responsible.” As a result, many of the students “seem to think before they act.”

The **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program** also had a beneficial impact on students’ families. According to teachers, parents are beginning to use the same terminology from the program as their children. Students share their plans for the public policy portfolio with their families, and parents report that as a result their children are more aware of how to identify and solve problems in Allentown. Teachers reported that students are cleaning up the neighborhood, which makes their parents proud of them.

Finally, teachers believed that the program “makes our school stronger.” It had reinforced the no bullying and discipline policies at Ritter. It had helped students understand that “they can make a difference in their community.” It had increased student curiosity and student interest in academics, especially in the public policy portfolio. Students had embraced a common vocabulary and the “scaffolding of learning works well within the framework.”

Teachers were proud that Ritter and Allentown have been recognized for its **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program**. The program had boosted their confidence and encouraged them to communicate and collaborate with other teachers in the District.

In the focus group conducted in Pasadena, California, during a 2007 **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program** conference, teachers had very similar responses. They praised the program highly and thought it had strengthened their schools and helped make them better teachers.

### **6.3 Student Focus Groups**

When asked what they had learned, students were very specific. According to them, these are the most important concepts they have learned in the **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program**:

- You have to share and respect.
- No bullying is important. You should not kick, hit, or punch.
- Justice is important because it is about fairness and kindness.
- Privacy means that you do not invade others’ privacy.
- Responsibility means you get your priorities straight.
- Responsibility means follow through with what you promise to do, like a contract.
- Responsibility means there are consequences and benefits to being responsible.
- Privacy is when you keep things to yourself.
- Government is designed to keep order and make rules.
- Authority is needed, especially your mother and father.

When asked about the impact of the program, students said that they have learned to “share your stuff,” “say thank you and you say you’re welcome,” and respect the privacy of others. One

student said that if “I get mad at my friends, I control my anger more because of social studies.” Students believed that the program had helped them develop better relations with their friends through greater-self-control and respect.

They made similar comments about their brothers and sisters. Many students said the program had helped them get along better with their brothers and sisters. As one student colorfully put it, “Anger shouldn’t be taken out on our family. We can squeeze a toy instead of our brother or sister.” Some students said that they felt more responsible toward their younger siblings as a result of the program and to “make sure that they don’t do anything wrong. That’s our responsibility.”

Students had similar comments about their parents. As a result of the program, they understand their parents’ roles and responsibilities better. As one student said, “don’t give your parents attitude when its time to stop playing with your friends because you get into trouble.”

Students also believed that the **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program** had helped them mature. One student said that “I’m a better person because of social studies.” Another student said that she understands responsibility better and that there are rewards for doing good things and “consequences for doing bad things.” Several students volunteered that they help more with dishes, the laundry, and other household tasks because they understand the concept of responsibility better. Finally, several students thought that studying the concept of privacy had helped them to respect their siblings more.

These students believed that Ritter had benefited from the **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program** too. As one student said, “responsibility and rules help Ritter to work. It would be nuts without rules.” Another student thought that “rules help Ritter to be organized. Everyone follows them and helps.” Students overwhelmingly thought that the program had helped them to behave more responsibly and to recognize the authority of the principal and teachers.

#### **6.4 Parent Focus Groups**

Several parents noticed very positive changes in their children that they attribute to the program. As one parent said, “children are working as a team. They are trying to resolve conflicts together, instead of one leader running the show.” The parent of a second grader said that the program had made his son conscious of school rules. Yet another parent said that their children are “working out conflicts, trying to talk things out, rather than getting physical.”

Although several parents said that their children did not talk about social studies, seven parents thought that social studies had made their children more knowledgeable about American history and government. One mother said that her son had become interested in children’s literature that dealt with civil rights and slavery. He talks to his parents and friends about history. This woman said it was a “joy” to see her son become engaged in social studies. One mother even admitted that she was learning about history from her six-year-old son.

Parents were happy that the program had encouraged their children to respect their teachers. All parents agreed that their children liked their teachers and showed respect toward them. One

parent said that her daughter loved her teacher and thought that she was the “best in the world.” Another parent recounted that her daughter gave her teacher a big hug when she left at the end of the day. These parents believed that the program had helped build stronger relations between their children and teachers.

Parents talked a great deal about the impact of the **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program** on their children’s relations with peers. According to most of them, the program had taught their children to help resolve arguments and conflicts without fighting immediately. “They are learning to respect the rights of others,” said one parent. “Children have been quoting the rules of the school.”

Parents also were pleased that older students were setting a good example for the younger ones. For this reason, they wanted to see the program implemented in the middle and high schools. Several parents said that the program had helped make their children more accepting and tolerant of others, which they considered a very positive development.

Parents thought that the **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program** had made Ritter a better school. One parent admitted that she was “petrified” to send her children to an Allentown school because the District had such a bad reputation, but her “eyes were opened at Ritter.” She thought that the “seed is planted at Ritter to carry through the rest of schooling.” Other parents agreed. Ritter is a safe and respectful school where their children are learning.

These parents wanted more information sent home about what is being taught in social studies. In fact, most of them wanted additional time devoted to social studies in their children’s classrooms.

They were pleased that their children were proud of Ritter and acted responsibly on school property. Several parents singled out principal Melissa Marcks for her leadership at Ritter.

Few of the parents were aware that the **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program** is a special program. Most of them equated it with the standard social curriculum.

## **7. Ritter School Climate**

### **7.1 Introduction**

As Peter Levine has argued in **The Future of Democracy: Developing the Next Generation of American Citizens** (2006), there are two basic models for understanding the civic education of young people. One is what he calls the “psychological deficits” model. This model assumes, in his words, that “there are problems with young people’s civic skills, knowledge, confidence and values,” and thus schools need to help improve young people’s civic abilities and attitudes. Levine calls the second model “institutional reform,” which is based on the premise that there are flaws in our institutions that make the acquisition of civic attitudes and engagement difficult.

The **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program** is based on a combination of both these models. On the one hand, the program assumes that elementary school is the place to begin teaching young people the rights and responsibilities of citizenship and the value of civic



engagement. On the other hand, the program is based on the assumption that elementary social studies needs to be enriched if students are to become engaged citizens.

Any description of a school's climate is necessarily subjective, even if it is based on quantitative evidence, and so now I will begin to use the first person singular when it is appropriate. This study will examine the impact of the **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program** at Ritter Elementary School by examining seven key elements of its school climate:

1. Physical appearance.
2. Faculty relations.
3. Student relations.
4. Leadership.
5. Attitudes.
6. The classroom.
7. Active citizenship.

## **7.2 Physical Appearance**

School staff and students take ownership of Ritter's school appearance. There is no litter in school or on school grounds. Graffiti is rare because students feel some sense of ownership of the school, and if graffiti appears, it is cleaned up quickly. At Ritter, students have discussed the problem of litter from kindergarten onwards as part of the **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program** and as part of their fifth grade public policy portfolio projects. As a result, students equate keeping Ritter neat with being good citizens.

Student and faculty bathrooms are clean and well maintained. Staff and students have respect for the school custodians and other maintenance staff who periodically come to Ritter to deliver supplies or make repairs.

Classrooms and grounds are clean and well-maintained. The classrooms are visible and inviting.

The hallways are very colorful with class hall displays identified by grade. There is one unique display that typifies the **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program**. At the beginning of the year, several classrooms wrote their own constitutions, signed them, and placed them on their classroom walls. These constitutions enumerated the rights and responsibilities of students and teachers with an emphasis on what students and teachers should expect from each other.

## **7.3 Faculty Relations**

One important element of school climate involves faculty relations. According to decades of educational research, in effective schools teachers have good interpersonal relations with their peers and create a professional community with shared norms and practices.

At Ritter Elementary School, faculty relations are very good, and the **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program** has played an important role in fostering collegial behavior. Although teachers are in their classrooms most of the day, they are not isolated from their peers. They chat in the hallways and eat lunch together in the teachers' cafeteria. They

also meet periodically to discuss curricula and plan lessons. As a result, there are informal and formal opportunities for faculty to collaborate.

In my visits to classrooms and the teachers' cafeteria, I never heard any students denigrated. When teachers mentioned particular students, they were discussed respectfully and constructively. Teachers also were constructive when speaking about each other or administrators. They used plenty of humor to describe school, as teachers often do, but usually at their own expense.

At any school, the teachers' lounge is an important site to observe faculty relations because (1) the lounge is a defined and separate space that is considered the territory of teachers; and (2) teachers interacting in the lounge create their own social organization. There is no teachers' lounge at Ritter, but there is a teachers' cafeteria that is crowded and lively 90 minutes a day during overlapping lunch periods. It is located behind the students' cafeteria and has a separate entrance, which affords a modicum of privacy.

At Ritter, the teachers' cafeteria is a pleasant place. Teachers treat this space as a good place to relax, eat, grouse about the lunch they hurriedly prepared, and talk with colleagues. The principal drops in to eat lunch, but her presence does not seem to inhibit teachers from talking, joking, and enjoying themselves.

The teachers' cafeteria is not a place where professional power struggles are played out. There is no sense of competitiveness and secrecy, and no one acts as a leader at the tables. There are no regular seating arrangements, which usually are associated with a hierarchical structure among teachers.

According to numerous studies of school climate, high-achievement schools have lively and supportive teachers' lounges that encourage social interaction for professional collaboration. This description fits the Ritter teachers' cafeteria well.

In this sense, the program helps contribute to improved faculty relations by enabling teachers to function as an informal professional learning community for 90 minutes each day. Although conversations are brief and unstructured, teachers consider them helpful and encouraging. In the absence of frequent group planning periods, the teachers' cafeteria serves as the place where faculty learns what their colleagues are doing in the program. Through the **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program**, Ritter teachers have formed an informal but effective professional learning community.

The program also is used by student teachers and substitute teachers. They spoke highly of the **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program** and seemed adept at using the curriculum in their own teaching.

## 7.4 Student Relations

The concepts of authority, privacy, responsibility, and justice are taught throughout the school year on every grade level, often through stories that are required reading. One reason why these concepts permeate Ritter is because Ms. Melissa Bell, a retired Allentown high school English teacher and the co-coordinator of the program site with Myron Yoder, has integrated that curriculum of the **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program** with the required classroom readings at each grade level. As a result, teachers can seamlessly integrate social studies and English in ways that strengthen both subjects.

The **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program** has provided a solid and usable framework for students. As a result, students treat each other respectfully because everyone has the same expectations about what constitutes proper behavior.



**The School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program promotes better relations among students.**

Students feel safe from violence and find Ritter's orderly environment and rules reasonable and comforting. Throughout the school, students are encouraged to put into practice what they have learned about authority, privacy, responsibility, and justice. As a result, they take responsibility for their own behavior, which means treating their fellow students with respect. The emphasis of the program on reciprocal rights and responsibilities helps students to understand the golden rule.

The principal and teachers strongly believed that discipline problems seriously declined once Ritter began implementing its **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program**. According to several teachers, a subtle but important example of the program's impact on student interaction can be seen on the school playground. Before the program began, students frequently visited the school nurse as a result of rough play. However, visits to the school nurse

have declined since the program began. Students now play more cooperatively and less violently with each other on the playground, which teachers attribute to the program's emphasis on responsibility.

Students seem happy to be at Ritter and do not act insecure or afraid of their fellow students. There is plenty of horseplay before school and on the playgrounds, particularly by boys, but no fighting.

The Allentown School District has an explicit no bullying policy, complete with lessons plans for guidance counselors and teachers. As several teachers pointed out to me, the no-bullying curriculum fits nicely into the **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program** with its emphasis on the peaceful resolution of disputes. During my seven months at Ritter, I did not witness any fighting among students or hear about any school fights.

## **7.5 Leadership**

Ritter Elementary School is unusual in that principal Ms. Melissa Marcks taught in the **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program** and served as a trainer before becoming principal. As a result, she has a superb understanding of the program and is deeply committed to it. This is a key element in the success of the program at Ritter.

Quietly but effectively on a day-to-day basis, Ms. Marcks conveys the importance of the program to teachers and support staff. Because of her background, she has credibility and a high level of trust and respect from teachers.

Ms. Marcks attributes much of Ritter's positive school climate to the **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program**. She believes that disciplinary problems in the school have declined 90 percent since the program began, which enables students and teachers to focus on learning. She also thinks that the program has encouraged Ritter teachers to lecture less and to have more and better discussions in their classrooms.

The steady work of Myron Yoder, Allentown School District's social studies coordinator and the co-coordinator of the program, also contributes to Ritter's success. Mr. Yoder, a former Allentown high school social studies teacher, is a strong and knowledgeable advocate for the program. He is constantly providing teachers with updates, information, curricular materials, and after-school enrichment activities to keep them informed and engaged. On the Allentown School District's internal Web site, he has even created a separate directory for teachers to access program curricular materials for their classrooms.

Much of the literature on educational effectiveness focuses on the critical importance of school leadership. Ms. Marcks is an example of how one principal can use her own experience in the program as a springboard to improve the school climate.

## 7.6 Attitudes

At Ritter Elementary School, students are proud of their school and feel like they are part of a community. This pride and sense of belonging partly come from the **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program**. This is an excellent example of the program's non-academic impact on the school's climate.

From kindergarten through fifth grade, students share a common vocabulary and set of concepts. They understand what it means to be a responsible person and a good citizen, and they know that their understanding is shared by teachers and administrators. As a result, everyone at Ritter feels as though they are working toward collective goals.

Students feel that teachers are listening to them, that they are represented, and that they have a voice in the school. They feel welcome and comfortable in talking to adults. Students speak about Ritter in proud, positive terms, and perhaps most importantly, they have a sense of belonging to something larger than themselves.

There is a very caring atmosphere at Ritter. Students feel loved and respected, and they seem to enjoy being in school. According to the surveys and focus groups, this partly stems from the lessons learned in the **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program**.

## 7.7 The Classroom

Over the past decade, there have been numerous studies done of civic education and elementary education. On the positive side, the 2006 National Assessment of Educational Progress showed that students in the fourth, eighth, and twelfth grades made gains in their knowledge of US and world history since the test was last administered in 2001. Seventy percent of fourth graders, 65 percent of eighth graders, and 47 percent of twelfth graders scored at or above the basic level of knowledge in history.

On the civics portion of the test, however, there was no significant increase in civic knowledge for eighth or twelfth graders since 1998. In these grades, the test focused on skills such as interpreting documents, analyzing arguments, and demonstrating the dispositions and responsibilities of citizenship.

On the elementary level, the educational news is more negative. In a 2007 issue of the journal *Science*, Robert C. Pianta and his colleagues reported on their observations of 2,500 elementary school classrooms in 400 school districts throughout the United States. According to this report, three out of four classrooms were "dull, bleak" places where little thinking was occurring.

Fifth graders spent 91 percent of their time either listening to the teacher or completing low-level worksheets. The authors of the study concluded that a typical student in these classrooms had a 1 in 14 chance of being in a stimulating learning environment, which are not very good odds. In another study, researchers found that coloring occupies more class time in some elementary schools than reading and mathematics combined.

This report and many others have concluded that good instruction has more impact on learning and on achievement than any other factor. Effective teaching may be rare, but it is critical to academic success.

The **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program** is an effective citizenship program at Ritter because the curriculum has these characteristics:

- Realistic content and a balanced, nonpartisan treatment of issues, controversies, and problems.
- A combination of important dates, facts, people, and events along with ideas, values, and principles of democracy.
- The use of community resources to enrich classroom instruction and learning and connect students to the world outside their classrooms.
- Engaging teaching strategies that focus on (1) class discussions; (2) effective questioning strategies; (3) small-group learning; (4) role-playing and debating; and (5) two culminating activities – the mock Congressional hearing and the public policy portfolio.

The **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program** addresses the shortcomings described in recent school reports by enabling students to study important content in ways that increases their knowledge, skills, and importantly, their civic dispositions.

On my first day at Ritter, I arrived late in the morning because I had been meeting with school officials in downtown Allentown. When I approached the front door, a student standing next to me outside the building opened the front door after we were buzzed in and beckoned me to enter the building first.

My first impressions of Ritter did not change over a seventh-month period. I found the students, friendly, polite, and eager to learn; the teachers welcoming and nurturing; and the administration supportive. The school was an orderly and learning-focused environment where everyone was engaged in a common enterprise.



**The School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program encourages thoughtful class discussions about American government and history.**

Most classroom lessons either come directly from the **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program** curriculum or use the program to teach reading and literature. Below are two examples from grade 1 and 2 lessons on responsibility.

**Table 11: Grade 1: Lesson on Responsibility (30 minutes)**

Lesson Elements	Teacher/Student Activities
Review	Teacher leads discussion of yesterday’s story about “The Zookeeper” around this question: who is responsible for opening the cage?
Reading	Teacher finishes the story.
Discussion	Teacher asks questions about responsibility and authority.
Class Activity	Teacher hands out pictures of the main characters to students who are placed in different parts of the room. Students had to choose which character was the most responsible and deserved an award by going over to the picture of that character. Before choosing a character, students had to close their eyes and think who made the zoo a wonderful place.

**Table 12: Grade 2: Lesson on Responsibility (40 minutes)**

Lesson Elements	Teacher/Student Activities
Nice Book	Teacher discusses the “Nice Book,” where teachers and students write special things in a book about classroom activities, such as a student helping another student on the computer. Teacher reads several recent examples.
Review	Teacher and students review definitions of responsibility, benefits, and costs.
Book Reading	Teacher reads “Horton Hatches an Egg” by Dr. Seuss.
Board Work	Teacher creates a three-column chart on “responsibility” with columns for home, school, and community, and students give examples.
Discussion	Students discuss costs and benefits of the characters in the Dr. Seuss story.
Workbook	Students list two costs and benefits from the story about Horton.



In both classes, students were orderly, focused, and eager to participate. They seemed to enjoy the lesson judging by their smiles and responses.

In the upper grades, the program becomes more oriented around government, history, and the Constitution. For example, in one fifth grade class on the three branches of government, first there was a review of the three branches of government, then students made a mobile coat hanger of the three branches, which would hang in their classroom, and then students did group work with their books.

In another fifth grade class, students had chosen smoking as their public policy portfolio. The class began with a discussion of smoking, clean air, and the steps involved in developing a public policy portfolio. Then the class divided into groups. One member from each group researched bibliographical sources on the class computers. While they were researching, the groups had to come up with a list of five questions to ask a local Pennsylvania State Representative who would be visiting their classroom the next day.

Afterwards, groups organized their portfolio information and worked on letters to state political figures asking them to support pending legislation that would limit smoking in public places and many private establishments. The class ended with silent reading on the subject of smoking and clean air.



**A fifth grade class's public policy portfolio on smoking, which won third prize in the city's public policy portfolio contest.**

That next day, I met the state representative. He told me that students were polite and well-behaved, and that they had asked him some of the best questions he had heard from young people.



At Ritter, class discussions in the program elicited varying kinds of responses. On April 26, 2006, I recorded the following kinds of student responses in four different classrooms:

**Table 13: Class Discussions in Four Social Studies Classes**

Class	One Word	Several Words	Extended
<b>Second Grade:</b> Learning about Privacy <b>Time:</b> 50 minutes Students discussed the concepts of privacy, authority, and responsibility and then applied it and explained their choices.	9	7	21
<b>Third Grade:</b> Learning about Privacy <b>Time:</b> 50 minutes Students discussed the role of privacy in e-mails, telephone conversations, thoughts and feelings, beliefs, behavior, space, friendships, and organizations.	12	18	11
<b>Kindergarten:</b> Lesson on Friendship <b>Time:</b> 15 minutes Teacher read “The Very Lonely Firefly” and students did board work on adjectives for how friends should act toward each other (nice, loving, friendly, sharing, etc.).	2	--	5
<b>Kindergarten:</b> Lesson on Privacy <b>Time:</b> 15 minutes Teacher read “Jessica Fish” and students discussed privacy with pictures and then drew a picture showing privacy.	3	4	1
<b>Total:</b>	25	29	38

At Ritter, some teachers were extremely effective at eliciting sustained student responses while other teachers usually asked questions that required a one-word answer. The **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program** encourages teachers to view question and response sequences as an important feature of the curriculum. According to the teacher guide for the primary grades, teachers should plan six types of questions: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

In all the classes I visited over a seven-month period, teachers eschewed lecturing. Every classroom lesson actively involved students. Several teachers were very adept at encouraging students to react to other students’ responses, and all of them called on non-volunteers as well as volunteers. Not all teachers, however, focused on eliciting extended responses that involved application, analysis, and evaluation.

In several classrooms, students used special journal program booklets that had been created at Ritter and are now used throughout the Allentown elementary schools. However, I observed few formal writing activities in connection with the **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program**. This may be a result of teachers following *Learning About the Foundations of Democracy: Teacher’s Guide for Primary Grades* (2000). This comprehensive guide focuses primarily on pedagogical methodologies unrelated to writing, such as conducting class discussions, using effective questioning strategies, and encouraging small group learning. The

27 lesson plans recommend a wide variety of creative and stimulating classroom activities, but writing is slighted as a way of learning.

If I had to identify the **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program** at its best in the classroom, I would pick a discussion I had with a fifth grade class on June 5, 2006. Earlier that day, this class had learned that their public policy portfolio on “Earth No Emergency Exit” (global warming) had received first place in the State of Pennsylvania Project Citizen Finals. I spoke to the class about their project for 30 minutes.



**Ritter students become actively engaged through their public policy portfolio projects.**

First, I had them describe how they had chosen the topic of global warming and what they had done to prepare their portfolio. Then I asked them how their project had changed not just their attitudes, but their everyday behavior. Many students articulately described the changes they are making in their lives to make the earth a cleaner and healthier place. It was very moving, and exemplified the power of the public policy portfolio to help students become more informed and engaged citizens.

## **7.8 Active Citizenship**

Numerous tests and studies have demonstrated that there is a large civic achievement gap between poor, some minority groups, and immigrant youths in comparison to middle-class, white, and native-born youths. As early as the fourth grade, African-American, Hispanic, and poor students perform significantly worse on the civics portion of the National Assessment of Educational Progress than white, Asian, and middle class students. These trends continue into adulthood and manifest themselves in different levels of civic engagement, from voting to lower levels of participation in voluntary organizations.

As Annette Lareau has shown in **Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life** (2003), poor and working-class families often have to deal with dysfunctional public institutions or a lack of resources and opportunities. But they have low expectations of these institutions and often have difficulty navigating or changing them. Part of this problem is educational.

On National Assessment of Educational Progress tests, minorities and students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds score lower than white and middle-class students, and they also report differences in the quality of instruction in their social studies classrooms. They were least likely to be engaged in dynamic and interactive classroom learning activities, such as mock trials, mock Congressional hearings, letter writing, and visits from community leaders. As a result, they are less likely to master the skills needed to become active citizens.



**At Ritter, all students in the program learn how to become engaged citizens.**

Ritter, like most of Allentown's schools, is a majority-minority school. Hispanic and African American student outnumber white students, and many students come from working-class or poor families. There also are significant academic achievement gaps between economically deprived and non-economically deprived students. At Ritter, however, all students in the program are learning to be active citizens, especially those in high implementation classrooms.

All students study the same curriculum, use the same concepts, and learn the same skills. In the high implementation classrooms, all students participate in a mock Congressional hearing and a public policy portfolio project. Regardless of their backgrounds, grades, and skills, from kindergarten through fifth grade they are engaged in dynamic and interactive learning activities that build their knowledge, skills, and civic dispositions in American history and government.

At Ritter, students are being educated to believe that civic and political participation can improve their neighborhoods, city, and nation. And just as importantly, they are learning the knowledge and skills to be effectively engaged.

## **8. The Power of Place-based Education**

In **The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life** (1998), historians Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelan examine the results of an in-depth national survey on Americans' uses of history. They found that many ordinary people are engaged in the past because it provides them with meaning and purpose. The survey also uncovered adult's deep alienation from the social studies they had been taught in school. Many of those surveyed liked their social studies teachers but found the study of history and civics boring and irrelevant. To them, it was little more than a jumble of disconnected facts and dates that seemed remote from their own lives.

In contrast, **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program** is a place-based program, and that may explain much of its value to students and teachers. Place-based educators, who are prominent in outdoor or environmental education, believe that education should prepare people to sustain the integrity of the places they inhabit. These are the characteristics of place-based education:

- It emerges from the particular attributes of a place, such as the environment, history, government, and politics.
- It is inherently experiential.
- It is reflective of an educational philosophy broader than "learn to earn."
- It connects place with self and community.

The **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program** may function like successful environmental programs by focusing learning directly within the local community of the student, which helps connect young people as citizens to their schools, neighborhoods, communities, and country.

When students at Ritter study privacy, authority, justice, and responsibility, they are not examining dry, distant abstractions. They are studying concepts and situations that are immediate and relevant to their lives. As a result, the program helps them better understand who they are and what they can accomplish as citizens, now and in the future.

In the **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program**, everything is filtered through the individual student, who is taught that he or she is a member of a civic community and has a potentially important role to play in sustaining a democracy. The program may be successful at Ritter because it increases students' sense of stewardship toward the school and adds to their sense of attachment toward their community.

## 9. Conclusion

Ritter Elementary School exemplifies what is best in the **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program**. In a quiet but determined fashion, Ritter administrators and teachers have made the program permeate the entire building. The academic and non-academic climate of Ritter is very palpable. Students understand the concepts of authority, privacy, responsibility, and justice from kindergarten through fifth grade. From the classroom to the hallways and from the playground to the cafeteria, students at Ritter believe that it is important to act in a civic fashion.

Teachers and administrators treat students with respect. Students treat teachers and administrators with respect. Everyone understands the rules and believes they are fair. There is order and purpose throughout the school. And the school understands that one of its major purposes is to develop the next generation of American citizens. Ritter operates on the assumption that students are more likely to succeed in life if they are civically engaged.

The **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program** is helping improve Ritter in another significant way. According to statewide and district test results, there is a positive correlation between high implementation classrooms and high state scores in reading and writing. The more involved students are in the program at all grade levels from kindergarten through fifth grade, the better they master these skills as measured on state standardized tests. For this reason alone, Ritter should strongly encourage all elementary school teachers to use the full curriculum and to complete the two culminating projects, the mock Congressional hearing and the public policy portfolio.

Through Ritter's **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program**, students are learning that they need to master knowledge, skills, and develop certain kinds of attitudes to address public problems and be active, engaged citizens. They also are learning that public institutions are likely to work better when citizens participate in public life. These are important and valuable lessons, and Ritter understands they are best learned when young.

At the other three elementary schools I visited in Allentown, I observed the program working in similarly effective ways. Principals, teachers, and students were as enthusiastic about the **School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program** as they were at Ritter and believed it had helped make their schools stronger and more successful.

Perhaps the value of the program can be summed up by an activity that took place in one of Ritter's fourth grade classes. During the unit on justice, students were outraged to learn of the "civil unrest and Jim Crow laws that once permeated parts of the country," in the words of their teacher.

Together, they wrote a letter to Ruby Bridges to congratulate her on the heroic, groundbreaking steps she took to desegregate the New Orleans public schools as a nine-year-old in 1960. By studying about Ruby Bridges and writing a letter to her, students are learning that even elementary school students have important roles to play as citizens.

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**Social Capital:**

The core idea of the concept of social capital is that social networks have value. Social capital refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. Social capital is related to civic virtue, but it calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when it is embedded in a dense network of reciprocal social relations.

Civic engagement and social capital entail mutual obligations and responsibility. Social networks and reciprocity can facilitate cooperation for mutual benefit. When economic and political behaviors are embedded in dense networks of social interaction, incentives for opportunism and bad behavior are reduced.

How can the positive consequences of social capital – mutual support, cooperation, trust, and institutional effectiveness – be increased? How can the negative consequences of social capital – sectarianism, ethnocentrism, corruption – be minimized? These are the two important questions in any discussion of social capital.

Social capital is very unevenly distributed throughout the United States. Differences among states are substantial, with ratios of about 3:1 between high- and low-ranking states. In a recent study, for example, social trust ranged from 17 percent of the population in Mississippi to 67 percent in North Dakota. The average number of associational memberships varied from 1.3 per person in Louisiana and North Carolina to 3.3 in North Dakota. Turnout in presidential elections has varied between 42 percent in South Carolina to 69 percent in Minnesota. And the number of nonprofit organizations per 1,000 inhabitants ranges from 1.2 in Mississippi to 3.6 in Vermont.

States with the highest indices of social capital: North Dakota, South Dakota, Wisconsin, Nebraska, Iowa, and Vermont. Close behind are Montana, Minnesota, New Hampshire, Maine, Massachusetts, and Connecticut.

States with the lowest indices of social capital: Nevada, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and Tennessee. Close behind are Texas, South Carolina, North Carolina, Kentucky, and West Virginia.

There is a strong interrelationship among social capital and civic engagement. In fact, it would be difficult to have one without the other. If civic engagement declines, so will social capital. And if social capital declines, civic engagement will suffer.

Below are four recommendations for increasing social capital and civic engagement through SVPDP:

- Promote full implementation in classrooms and schools. The public policy portfolio and the mock Congressional hearing are especially effectiveness at building social capital because students are involved in group activities.
- Tie the SVPDP curriculum both to larger national events and local issues and problems. To be civically engaged and build social capital, students need to feel that they can be active citizens and make their neighborhoods better places to live.
- Encourage teachers to creating engaging classrooms. You cannot build social capital and civic engagement through passive, top-down educational activities.
- Model the importance of social capital and civic engagement. Demonstrate to students that there are many different ways in which ordinary citizens can make their communities better places. As Gandhi said, become the change that you advocate.

On the secondary school level, the teaching of history is dominated by textbooks. Most of these textbooks present a top-down view of US history that heavily emphasizes the role of the state since 1789. This is a very important theme in American history, but by focusing on the state these textbooks slight social movements and rarely discuss citizen engagement. They underplay the role of nongovernmental institutions in American life and the role of private citizens in bringing about improvements in race relations, labor relations, the place of women in American life, and other important issues.

The SVPDP curriculum helps teachers and students better understand the interrelationship between citizen engagement and the development of public policy. It also helps by showing how ordinary citizens have played an important role in American history. Unless we can find ways to engage ordinary citizens in civic life, our social capital will decline.