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Nonprofit enlists students to fight violence

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By Todd Cohen

RALEIGH, N.C. — In the 2013-14 school year, while the number of reportable acts of crime and violence in North Carolina schools fell 4.7 percent to 11,608, the number of assaults on school personnel by students grew 14.4 percent to 1,333, and the number of sexual assaults grew 38.8 percent to 179, according to state data.

From 2004 to 2012, the most recent year for which data are available, 2,814 North Carolina residents ages 10 to 24 died as a result of violence, including 1,252 deaths from suicide.

And 20 percent to 30 percent of U.S. students say they have been bullied at school, while 70 percent of young people say they have seen bullying in their schools.

Working to prevent violence by raising awareness among students, helping them manage conflicts, and engaging them in service projects in their schools and communities is the National Association of Students Against Violence Everywhere, or SAVE, a Raleigh-based nonprofit.

“School violence has become more accepted in society,” says Carleen Wray, executive director of SAVE. “We are desensitized to it. Students are growing up with bullying.”

Starting with a group that students at West Charlotte High School created in 1989 after the death of a student who was trying to break up a fight at an off-campus party, SAVE now has established 2,140 chapters in 48 states and seven countries.

SAVE operates with an annual budget of \$250,000, two full-time employees and 75 volunteers. It gets 75 percent of its funds from contributions, and the rest from \$100 annual dues that chapters pay, the sale of educational materials and items, in-kind support, and an annual summit that in March attracted 400 people from eight states.

SAVE chapters, which operate at elementary, middle and high schools, and at community organizations, offer a range of programs.

At Garner High School, with part of a \$75,000 grant to SAVE from AllState Insurance to promote safe-driving efforts at 20 North Carolina chapters, faculty adviser Vickie Szarek is working with students to raise awareness about auto accidents, which are the number one cause of death among teens.

At Chapel Hill High School, SAVE students painted over a graffiti-filled wall and cleaned up garbage in the area to create a “Peace Garden.”

And at Cuthbertson High School in Waxaw just southeast of Charlotte, students hold an annual drive to collect teddy bears they distribute to children at a domestic-violence shelter, where the students read stories to the children.

SAVE formerly was a program of the state Center for the Prevention of School Violence, which in 1994 held 12 town hall meetings throughout the state to try to find a model it could help replicate in schools and community groups.

The Center adopted the SAVE model from West Charlotte High School after learning about it at a town hall meeting. It became a separate nonprofit in 2001, when it also received a five-year grant of \$350,000 a year from Chevrolet that helped it add at least 200 chapters a year.

Bullying, physical assaults, drug deals and other violence and crimes have “become a norm” in elementary, middle and high schools, Wray says.

And while metal detectors may help improve the security of schools, she says, understanding the family, mental and other issues that students bring with them to school is critical to prevent violence.

“We really try to reach students and give them the life skills and education and knowledge to create safe environments for themselves in their school and their community,” she says.

To help do that, SAVE focuses on relationships among students and with teachers and administrators.

Bullies bully, for example, because of an “imbalance of power,” Wray says.

“You aren’t a victim unless it’s continued and repeating,” she says. “If one other student steps up for a student being targeted, bullying is more likely to stop.”

A key to preventing youth and school violence is to “talk to kids,” Wray says. “They have wonderful ideas, they know what’s going on in the school and community, and they truly want to make a difference and be part of the solution.”