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Milwaukee Violence-Free Zone Initiative

by Byron R. Johnson
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**THE CENTER FOR
NEIGHBORHOOD ENTERPRISE
VIOLENCE-FREE ZONE INITIATIVE:
A MILWAUKEE CASE STUDY**

January 13, 2009

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Background

The Center for Neighborhood Enterprise (CNE)¹ was founded in 1981 by former civil rights activist and life-long community organizer Robert Woodson, Sr. The three founding principles established by Woodson to govern and direct CNE, which still serve as the guideposts for the organization 27 years later, are:

1. Those suffering from the problem must be involved in the creation and implementation of the solution;
2. The principles of the market economy should be applied to the solution of societal problems; and
3. Value-generating and faith-based programs and groups are uniquely qualified to address the problems of poverty.

At the core of CNE's philosophy and approach is a recognition that effective, community-based programs originate in those same communities, and not necessarily from ivory towers or subject matter experts who often have very little practical or first-hand knowledge of these communities. As Woodson explained:

The successful programs and interventions that I've discovered over the years were not from people within civil rights groups, government bureaucracies or higher education institutions, but were people that are working quietly within these communities. Some of these people were in poverty but not of it, while others were once of poverty – meaning they were former criminals and/or drug addicts – but had transformed their lives and now serve as role models for others in the community. In a sense, much of what we do at CNE is simply to find these organic leaders and support and help grow their work.

¹ Formerly known as the *National* Center for Neighborhood Enterprise.

Working closely with school safety officers and local police, the origins of the Violence-Free Zone (VFZ) initiative followed very much along these lines as well.

The Violence-Free Zone Initiative – Its Origins

The thinking and approach of the VFZ initiative, which is a youth-violence prevention and reduction program located within middle or high schools, was actually developed and formulated outside of the public school environment. Woodson already had a great deal of knowledge about gang behavior and youth violence from his days studying and working with the House of Umoja, a FBCO (Faith-based or community organization) based in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania as well as other community-based organizations. Woodson applied his knowledge on addressing youth violence and gang-related issues back in January of 1997 at Benning Terrace, a public housing development in Washington DC where youth violence had led to more than 50 youth deaths in recent years, culminating with the shooting death of a 12-year old boy.

Woodson and CNE helped to craft a peace agreement between the warring youth factions and helped bring life skills, job training and job placement services for youth seeking an alternative to their drug- and crime-filled lifestyle. This peace accord was possible as a result of CNE's openness to recognize and learn from the skills and abilities of community organizations and leaders in addressing particular community problems and issues. One of the key lessons that emerged from these efforts was the knowledge of how much influence these violent youth leaders had on young people in their neighborhoods. Unfortunately, in Benning Terrace, they used it negatively to control –and terrorize –the community. However, after CNE's intervention, these same youth leaders used their power to turn the community in a positive direction as they became coaches of athletic teams and motivated younger kids to exhibit good behavior and complete their school work. Woodson and CNE saw how youth leaders influenced their younger peers and used this insight in creating what later became the role of Youth Advisor within the VFZ Initiative (as will be described later).

A key contributor to the development of the VFZ initiative was Omar Jahwar, who worked with the youth population as a prison gang specialist in a Dallas prison. In 1996, Jahwar invited Woodson to speak to the youth he was working with at the prison. Woodson was so

impressed with Jahwar's approach and connection to these youth that he encouraged and supported him in starting a community-based organization, named Vision Regeneration, Inc., to serve as a partner with CNE on violence prevention activities within the community.

The general premise for Woodson was to convince Jahwar they should work 'upstream' with youth not yet imprisoned but at-risk of becoming so. Jahwar began by working in the neighborhood surrounding Madison high school in Dallas, Texas. In the spring of 1999, the school's principal, Robert Ward, had expelled 50 youths from the school for disruptive behavior. Jahwar, with private funding obtained through CNE, provided summer jobs for these youths, both in an effort to make connections with these youth and also as a way to get rival gang members to begin talking to one another.

Before the beginning of school that next fall, Jahwar met with Ward, both to discuss the future of the expelled youths, and to offer a proposal to help the principal deal with the overall issue of violence in the high school. As Jahwar described the meeting:

During the summer, we had built some momentum in terms of building relationships with the kids and getting them to at least talk to one another. We asked the principal to accept these kids back, and we would assume the responsibility for their behavior and bring it under control.

The principal took Jahwar up on his offer, providing Vision Regeneration with space within the school and \$100,000 for one semester to hire six youth advisors, whose job was to establish and grow their relationship with a select number of the youth who previously were the cause of much of the school violence. However, they were sure to also add youth to their caseload who demonstrated more exemplary behavior and academic performance, so as not to 'brand' their effort as only being about working with delinquents.

By the fall of 2000, the principal saw dramatic improvements in the safety and overall atmosphere to the school, and offered a strong recommendation to the Dallas superintendent of schools, who made Vision Regeneration a listed vendor. Currently this program, subsequently dubbed the Violence-Free Zone (VFZ), currently receives \$500,000 annually for its work in 14 Dallas middle and high schools.

How the Violence-Free Zone Initiative Works: The 10% Rule

One of the central challenges to public schools is the disruption of the educational environment and educational process resulting from instability within the school, often a product of neighborhood rivalries or gang-related conflicts occurring during school time. What Jahwar and Woodson had both learned from their previous experiences working with gangs and violent youth was the importance of identifying and reaching out to the leaders of these gangs. Kwame Johnson, national coordinator of the VFZ programs for CNE, described how this dynamic translated into working within the high school environment:

If you have a high school of 1,000 or more kids, there are usually about 10% of those kids responsible for most of the incidents and disruptions occurring within the school. About 10% of these kids, in turn, are the leaders that orchestrate much of the disruptions, usually in the form of one gang acting out on another gang. Much of the VFZ strategy boils down to first identifying, and second, trying to develop relationships with these 10 or so leaders. So, the 10% rule is really about the 10% of kids causing the disruption at school, and then drilling down to the 10% of those that are really the driving force behind those conflicts. By engaging and re-directing these leaders, we have seen significant reductions in incidents, particularly gang-related incidents, in the schools where the VFZ initiative is operating.

The VFZ model entails recruiting and training Youth Advisors, who are generally mature young adults from the same neighborhoods as the students in the schools they serve. These Youth Advisors command trust and respect because they have faced and overcome the same challenges these youth are facing. They serve several roles, including: hall monitors, mentors, counselors, role models, and ‘peace-makers’ when conflicts flare up in the school.

Woodson describes the type of people sought out to serve this Youth Advisor role as ‘community healers,’ or ‘grassroots Josephs,’ the latter in reference to the biblical character and the trials he endured, as well as his subsequent transformation as a leader in the service of Pharaoh and helping Egypt during a time of famine. As Woodson explains:

Grassroots Josephs may not have degrees and certifications on their walls, but they do have this – the powerful, uncontestable testimonies of people whose lives have been salvaged through their work. The undeniable fact that lives have been

transformed through the work of modern-day Josephs must be appreciated even by observers who may be skeptical about their approach.²

Methodological Approach

In order to gain a more complete understanding and assessment of the effectiveness of the Milwaukee VFZ, we completed a case study based upon in-depth interviews with: 1) key staff from CNE and the VFZ, 2) members of the Latino Community Center, 3) leaders from the Running Rebels Community Organization, 4) select officials from the Milwaukee Public Schools, 5) representatives of the foundations funding the VFZ in Milwaukee, and 6) others with knowledge of the VFZ in Milwaukee. These face-to-face interviews were transcribed and excerpts appear throughout this case study.

We also analyzed data provided to us by the Milwaukee Public Schools. This data includes the results of the Student and Parent Climate Surveys, which probe respondents on the perceived safety of the school and environment. Additionally, we assess preliminary official data provided by the Milwaukee Public Schools on suspensions, truancy, violent and non-violent incidents, and academic performance. In combination, these in-depth interviews and data from the Milwaukee Public Schools capture critical qualitative and quantitative insights into the preliminary results of this intervention designed to reduce youth violence.

It is equally important to note that this case study on the VFZ in Milwaukee schools does not employ an experimental research design with random assignment of students into experimental and control groups. We are fully aware that randomized research designs provide a much more rigorous and preferred approach when it comes to evaluating the merits of various program interventions. Unfortunately, major impact studies employing such stringent rigor are quite rare due to significant costs, time, and resources necessary to complete them. The current research, however, is quite useful in providing preliminary insights into the functioning and early results of the VFZ in

² Woodson, Sr., Robert; *The Triumphs of Joseph: How Today's Community Healers Are Reviving Our Streets and Neighborhoods*; P. 76, the Free Press; 1998.

Milwaukee public schools. Indeed, this case study represents a potential first step in determining the feasibility of pursuing a longitudinal and randomized impact study.

Findings

The VFZ initiative in Milwaukee has its roots in a 1993 request to CNE from the Milwaukee-based Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation. The Bradley Foundation, with which CNE had collaborated and had received funding since 1986, asked them to help it identify faith-based and community organizations (FBCOs) as a part of a civic-focused initiative the foundation was launching. Over the years, CNE provided training and technical assistance to many faith-based and community groups in Milwaukee's central city. One group CNE met in 2003 was the Latino Community Center (LCC), located on the south side of Milwaukee, which was already doing work with the local high school to help them with gang-related incidents within the school.

As Woodson explained:

The Latino Community Center had already negotiated an agreement with the South Division High School to have some of their youth staff in the building when we discovered them. That helped us to know that we were already on the same page with the Center and so, with the initial support of the Bradley and other local foundations, we decided to launch the VFZ program in Milwaukee.

Beginning in September of 2005, CNE and LCC formed a partnership to implement the VFZ initiative in South Division High School, which had been plagued with escalating youth violence and gang-related conflicts in recent years. The first year of VFZ was funded entirely with private foundation dollars, through a consortium of local foundations coordinated through the Bradley Foundation. CNE deliberately followed this approach of using initial private funding when beginning the VFZ initiative, so it could demonstrate actual results before approaching public agencies for funding. This harkens back to one of CNE's founding principles -- *The principles of the market economy should be applied to the solution of societal problems* – with the program outcomes representing the 'goods' provided through the VFZ Initiative. As Woodson explained:

We don't even approach a school or other public agency for funding until we can show the impact and cost savings associated with reducing suspensions and gang-related incidents within the schools. We feel this is central to the integrity of our organization and the community partners to sell our program based on results.

In the past year, confidence in this model made it possible in Richmond, Virginia, for the Police Department to actually take the lead in raising support for the VFZ there.

CNE and Community Partnering

CNE is very particular when selecting a local community partner FBCO with which to entrust the operational responsibilities for the VFZ initiative. Another of CNE's founding principles -- *Those suffering from the problem must be involved in the creation and implementation of the solution* – is also represented in the process by which CNE identifies, or sometime creates, the local community partners that assume the responsibility for implementing the VFZ Initiative. As Woodson explained:

When we come into a city looking for the right community partner, I generally start networking through any contacts – family, friends, and colleagues – about community-serving organizations already working with youth. We will also walk into barber shops and local restaurants to find out where people go to get help in times of trouble. This searching mostly takes place through informal community networks, among people who 'know each other', and generally not through public social service agencies or local elected officials.

Sometimes the search process yields organizations such as the LCC in Milwaukee with whom CNE partners (or 'buys') to implement the VFZ Initiative. At other times, CNE's search efforts produces individuals, such as with Omar Jahwar in Dallas, where CNE literally helps to build (or 'make') the partner organization to implement the program. In either instance, CNE provides technical assistance (i.e., capacity-building organizational and financial management, resource development and staff training) to assure that the organization is able to implement and sustain the VFZ initiative in that city.

CNE's high standards for its local partners are not indicative of a typical corporate franchise mentality, where one size fits all. On the contrary, the Center's approach to partnering with, or helping to create, its community VFZ partners also reflects a degree of humility within the CNE organizational culture by providing guidance, but delegating practically all of the

operational decision-making for a local VFZ site to these partners. Furthermore, these local partners are the ones knowledgeable on how to *adapt* the principles for the VFZ to work within their particular context, with CNE serving as enablers and facilitators of these organizations' implementation of the CNE vision and model.

Typically, CNE identifies only one community partner per VFZ site, through which all Youth Advisors are recruited, trained and monitored. However, given the scope of VFZ Milwaukee, which is currently in eight high schools and growing to as many as 20 in the coming years, and the distinct demographics between the primarily Latino South side and the primarily African-American north side of the city, CNE chose two community partners: the Latino Community Center (LCC) on the southern side and Running Rebels Community Organization (RRCO) on the Northern side.

Latino Community Center

The Latino Community Center is only a seven-year old organization, but has made rapid strides over the past five years to establish itself as a key resource for its community, particularly the youth. What Woodson and CNE found particularly noteworthy of the LCC, aside from its initial outreach to the local South Division High School prior to VFZ, was its direct effort to expand outreach into the community by having its staff simply 'walk the streets' two days out of each week. LCC staff members simply walk up to youth and adults, introduce themselves, and listen to them about the challenges and issues they see their community facing. They have also developed strong relationships with the pastors of local churches, who often join them on these community walks.

LCC's success, both through this outreach as well as from its programming in response to those needs, bore strong resemblance to CNE's early violence intervention work at Benning Terrace in Washington DC, whereby faction leaders were identified, engaged and re-directed from criminal activities towards more positively-focused career development and community services. In fact, LCC's success in addressing youth violence and gang-related incidents in the community naturally led them to seek out a relationship with the local high school, where gang-related incidents were on the rise. As Jorge Perez, interim director for the LCC, explained:

As we were succeeding in addressing gang-related conflicts in the community, we noticed that these problems were continuing and growing in the local high school. That was a little frustrating for us, because we weren't in the schools and didn't have any continuity with the kids during that time. This is a real problem at South Division, where there are eight gangs represented in the student body, all in close contact with one another. By getting into the schools, we were able to maintain our connection, relationship and most importantly the accountability with the kids, because now they see us and have to deal with us all day.

Initially, the principal at South Division would have only brought LCC into the schools in response to gang-related incidents, such as fights and other disruptions. However, after a student was stabbed to death during school in September of 2005, the principal agreed to give LCC an ongoing presence in the school, laying the groundwork for the VFZ program, which officially began in September of 2005. After one year of the VFZ Initiative the safety at the high school improved significantly and the school subsequently received an award as one of the safest schools among MPS' twenty high schools.³ CNE then took these and other positive outcomes to a meeting brokered by the Bradley Foundation with William Andrekopoulos, the superintendent of the Milwaukee Public School System. The superintendent was so impressed, within three months of that first meeting he provided funding through the school system to expand VFZ to five additional high schools, beginning in September of 2007. As Andrekopoulos explained:

We are expanding the Violence Free Zone Initiative because it works. This pilot program, using community engagement and the support of key community organizations, has proven to be a pro-active way to support the needs of young people in lieu of having them get trapped in the criminal justice system.

LCC managed the Violence-Free Zone in two of the first six schools, which included South Division, while CNE's other community partner, the Running Rebels, assumed management of the other four.⁴

³ Excluding charter schools.

⁴ In January, 2008, MPS added a seventh school, Madison, and in September, 2009, an eighth, Bradley Tech, both of which were assigned to LCC for management of the VFZ.

Running Rebels Community Organization

Running Rebels Community Organization (RRCO), originally named for its basketball programs, was founded in 1980 with the mission of providing high-risk youth on the north side of Milwaukee with athletic, academic, life skills, and career training services. One of the strengths of the RRCO was their strong working relationship with the courts for youth in the community. As with LCC, RRCO was always looking for opportunities to collaborate with government agencies.

As Dawn Barnett, associate director for RRCO, explained:

We are always working hard to develop good working relationships with the courts, the police, and other public agencies that deal with our kids. We felt the lack of continuity and connection we had with the schools, so we welcomed the opportunity to work with the schools, and place staff within the schools, which is what VFZ allows us to do. Being a partner with CNE on the Violence-Free Zone initiative also helps to legitimize the role of our organization with these youth and in the community.

RRCO has also seen improvements in working relationships with the police and district attorney's office in terms of a greater openness to community input provided through their organization. However, similar to LCC, RRCO was frustrated by the lack of continuity and connection with the local high schools. Even though the local high school, Marshall, had implemented a school safety improvement program in 2005, there was no community participation, oversight or liaison associated with the program.

The Foundation Community

The other distinctive feature of VFZ Milwaukee as a public-nonprofit-private collaboration is the active support it has received from the foundation community, led by the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation. The Bradley Foundation, which had funded CNE initiatives in Washington DC and elsewhere as far back as 1986, coordinated with other foundations in Milwaukee to support the VFZ entirely during its pilot implementation in South Division High School. The consortium continues to provide more than a third of the program's overall operating budget. The foundation was also instrumental in getting Milwaukee Public

Schools, specifically the school superintendent, to sit down at the table with CNE to negotiate and implement the VFZ. The foundation leaders were the ones who initially introduced Woodson and CNE to Victor Barnett of the Running Rebels.

Dan Schmidt, Vice-President for Programs at the Bradley Foundation, described the critical role Woodson and CNE played in getting the MPS to buy into the program:

CNE played an essential role in bringing VFZ about. Although their partner organizations were already skilled and knowledgeable to do the work, it was Woodson and CNE's credentials, particularly their experience in engaging school systems. What made these negotiations particularly successful, however, was that they not only gained access to the schools for the VFZ staff, but also got them to invest financially in the operations of the program.

Milwaukee Public Schools – Differences You Can Measure

In the years preceding the arrival of the VFZ initiative, many Milwaukee observers believed the Milwaukee Public School System (MPS) represented one of the most troubled school districts in the state, based primarily on its absenteeism and truancy rates, which were perennially among the highest in the state. Furthermore, MPS also had the dubious distinction of having the highest school suspension rate in the nation. In 2008, MPS had received grant funding from the Safe Schools/Healthy Students grant program from the United States Department of Justice, which it used to cover some of their investment in the VFZ program.

The impact of the VFZ Initiative can be measured from both a qualitative and quantitative standpoint. Qualitatively, principals and other school officials have observed positive changes in the school environment with the presence of the VFZ Youth Advisors in the schools. As Mark Kuxhause, principal for the South Division High School, explained:

The climate of the school has definitely changed over the past two years. The VFZ complements the efforts of the school faculty and is an instrumental component to the other services offered at South Division.

The Youth Advisors represent a critical support system for teachers, who can spend less time simply trying to maintain order and more time providing educational instruction. As Dr. Paul Armour, principal of Marshall High School, described:

The program has been very beneficial in assisting teachers and school staff with addressing behavioral and safety concerns brought about by the youth who have been identified as being “chronic disrupters” or in need of supplemental support.

Finally, the Youth Advisors bring with them an inherent level of cultural competency, insofar as they live in the community and lived through much of the challenges the youth face, which impact how school staff interacts with students during school.

Youth Advisors

The Youth Advisors are the cornerstone of the VFZ program model. These staff, who are typically between the ages of 19 and 30, all come from, and continue to live in, the same neighborhoods as the students, and most have struggled with the same issues, such as gang-related crime and substance abuse. They are employed by CNE’s community partner organization(s) within the city where VFZ is operating. Table 1 below shows some of the contrasts in the work and mind-set of these youth advisors, as compared with school social worker and counselor staff.

Table 1: Youth Advisors and Social Workers/Counselors

| | Youth Advisors | Social Workers/Counselors |
|---|---|--|
| <i>They generally relate to students as...</i> | Friends | Clients |
| <i>Make themselves available to students...</i> | 24/7 | 9 to 5 |
| <i>The daily work activities are...</i> | Driven by student needs | Generally pre-determined through position descriptions |
| <i>Skills and knowledge primarily based on...</i> | Similar background and experiences/struggles as faced by students | Professional licensure/certification |

[A Day in the Life of a Youth Advisor](#)

The VFZ model is simple, but the work is not easy. The youth advisors work closely with MPS School Safety Officers, teachers, and counselors, as well as the Milwaukee Police Department. Figure 1 below outlines what a typical day for a Youth Advisor Coordinator involves.

Figure 1: A Day in the Life of a Youth Advisor

1. ***Walking the Streets*** – The youth advisors walk around within about 1,000 feet outside the school before the day begins. The advisors encourage students towards school and pick up information on any brewing gang conflicts, touching base with any police officers in the immediate vicinity;
2. ***Greeting the Students*** as they come in to school, offering any support they can to school security personnel, making themselves visible and available to any students that may have issues from home or for other reasons;
3. ***Tardy Hall*** – For students arriving late to school, youth advisors meet with youth that are chronically late to find out why the student is continually tardy. Sometimes, advisors will also put calls to home for late or absent students to identify issues affecting their attendance;
4. ***Walking the Halls*** – Between classes youth advisors walk around the halls, redirecting students, maintaining a presence/ keeping radar up for any possible individual ‘beefs’, neighborhood rivalries, or gang-related conflicts, and touching base with teachers on any behavior issues in the classroom;
5. ***Lunchtime*** – A critical relationship-building opportunity for the youth advisors with the students, building trust and maintaining visibility;
6. ***Mediation*** – As scheduled throughout the day, participate in teacher-student, parent-student, and student-student mediation to surface and resolve issues causing disruption within the school and classes.

In addition to these services supporting the whole school, each Youth Advisor also carries a case load of anywhere between 10-25 students, many of whom are referrals from either the principal, teachers, or counselors. However, the Youth Advisors also seek out other students who may not have behavioral issues, but instead are clearly academic and/or social leaders in the school. This type of diversification of caseload also counteracts any stigma for a youth assigned to a Youth Advisor as solely because of delinquency and issues associated with high-risk youth.

Assessing Data from the Milwaukee Public Schools

The impact the VFZ initiative has had within the schools is not only descriptive, but is captured through changes in data and outcomes tracked through the Milwaukee Public School System. In the long run, the VFZ initiative in Milwaukee hopes to see improvements in

academic performance resulting from a safer school environment. In the near term, however, the VFZ is demonstrating an immediate effect in three primary areas:

1. Improved safety within the schools, as measured both by student and parent perceptions and by actual reported decreases in the number of violent and non-violent incidents reported in the school;
2. Increased presence of students in school (i.e., reduced suspensions and truancy); and
3. Improved academic performance (i.e., higher average GPA in school).

These three measures represent the immediate (safety), interim (presence), and long-term (academic) outcomes and impact envisioned by VFZ. However, it is important to keep in mind that VFZ staff is not directly involved in the education of youth, although the expectation is that a safer school environment will lead to improvements in academic performance.

[About the Schools](#)

For purposes of this case study evaluation, we examined the eleven schools that implemented VFZ programs between September 2005 and November 2007⁵. These eleven schools were grouped into two categories; one being the ‘regular’ high schools (South Division, Bay View and Custer), and the other grouping of special subdivision sites, where two to three ‘mini’ high schools with separate principals share a single school building (Marshall, North Division, and Washington). The reason for this distinction is because of the special challenges posed by these sub-divided schools, whereby the Youth Coordinators, who serve as the single point-of-contact, are challenged with developing relationships with each of the principals in each separate school.

Table 2 below shows the specific schools in each grouping, along with the month and year when VFZ started at each location.

⁵ VFZ expanded to two other high schools in 2008, which was too recent for reporting on any outcomes from the Milwaukee Public School data sets.

Table 2: VFZ Program Sites and Starts

| Name of School | Sub-Division | VFZ Launch Date | FBCO Partner |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------|--|
| South Division | N/A | September 2005 | Latino Community Center (LCC) |
| Bay View | N/A | September 2007 | LCC |
| Custer | N/A | September 2007 | Running Rebels Community Organization (RRCO) |
| Marshall | Academy of Aviation | September 2007 | RRCO |
| | Dubois | September 2007 | RRCO |
| | Montessori | September 2007 | RRCO |
| Washington | Expeditionary Learning | September 2007 | RRCO |
| | Information Technology | September 2007 | RRCO |
| | Law Education & Public Service | September 2007 | RRCO |
| North Division | Genesis | November 2007 | RRCO |
| | Truth Institute for Leadership | November 2007 | RRCO |

The tables below provide a comparison between the regular and subdivision VFZ schools versus the MPS high school averages. Subsequently we will provide a school to school comparison of South Division (VFZ) and Bradley Tech (non-VFZ), which spans from the 2003-2004 (2 years before VFZ implementation at Southside) to 2007-2008 school years.

[Safety within the Schools](#)

This set of outcomes examines both perceptions of changes in school safety and/or the overall school environment, as well as changes in the number of actual violent and non-violent incidents reported by the school.

Perceptions -- The data on perceptions examined whether there was an increase in the percentage of respondents (i.e., students and parents) who agreed or strongly agreed with the following statements, pre- and post VFZ implementation:

- *Safety*: “My school makes sure that classrooms are safe and orderly.”
- *Environment*: “My school has a friendly and welcoming atmosphere.”

Tables 3 and 4 show the changes in levels of agreement for each group of respondents concerning school safety and the overall school atmosphere. As can be seen in Table 3, students

from ‘regular’ VFZ schools report significant increases in perceived safety as well as the overall environment of the school post the VFZ. The results are somewhat mixed in Sub-division VFZ schools, with slightly less reporting increases in perceived safety, while there is a 10 percent increase in perceived improvements to school environment. Interestingly, students from other Milwaukee Public Schools report a substantially higher perceived safety as well as environment in 2006-2007 (pre-VFZ) and reported a slight increase this last year. This finding provides preliminary evidence that the VFZ initiative -- working in some of Milwaukee’s most challenging schools – has already made significant progress, at least regarding student perceptions, in improving both the safety and atmosphere of these schools.

Table 3. Student Climate Survey Respondents

| | School Cohort | Pre-VFZ (2006-07 ⁶) % agree/strongly agree | Post-VFZ % agree/strongly agree | % increase (decrease) |
|--------------------|--------------------------------|---|------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| | <i>Regular VFZ</i> | | | |
| Safety | | 50% | 66% | 32% |
| Environment | | 50% | 61% | 22% |
| | <i>Sub-division VFZ</i> | | | |
| Safety | | 55% | 52% | (5%) |
| Environment | | 50% | 55% | 10% |
| | <i>MPS High School Average</i> | | | |
| Safety | | 66% | 71% | 7% |
| Environment | | 66% | 69% | 5% |

The perceptions of parents, provided in Table 4, are even more pronounced than those of students. The difference between perceptions of school safety and a friendly school environment are significantly improved between the time period pre- and post-VFZ, for both ‘regular’ as well as Sub-division VFZ schools. Perceptions of parents of other high school students in Milwaukee Public Schools remains unchanged during the same time period. In sum, the VFZ initiative has significantly lowered the gap between the perceived safety of classrooms as well as the school environment more generally, in a short period of time.

⁶ The one exception is South Division high school which utilizes 2004-2005 data for pre-VFZ, given its implementation was in the 2005-2006 school year.

Table 4. Parents Climate Survey Respondents

| | School Cohort | Pre-VFZ % agree/strongly agree | Post-VFZ % agree/strongly agree | % increase (decrease) |
|--------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| | <i>Regular VFZ</i> | | | |
| Safety | | 59% | 68% | 15% |
| Environment | | 69% | 78% | 13% |
| | <i>Sub-division VFZ</i> | | | |
| Safety | | 73% | 89% | 22% |
| Environment | | 68% | 87% | 28% |
| | <i>MPS High School Average</i> | | | |
| Safety | | 90% | 90% | 0% |
| Environment | | 92% | 93% | 1% |

Report of school-based incidents – This set of outcomes considers whether or not the number of violent and/or non-violent incidents decreased following VFZ implementation. Table 5 shows the changes in incidents reported pre- and post VFZ implementation.

Table 5. Number of Violent/Non-violent Incidents Reported by School

| School Cohort | # of Violent incidents | | | # of Non-violent incidents | | |
|-------------------------|------------------------|-----------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------|----------------------------------|
| | <i>Pre-VFZ</i> | <i>Post-VFZ</i> | <i>% decrease (increase)</i> | <i>Pre-VFZ</i> | <i>Post-VFZ</i> | <i>% decrease (increase)</i> |
| Regular VFZ | 1,191 | 805 | 32% | 17,246 | 13,770 | 20% |
| Sub-division VFZ | 762 | 698 | 8% | 5,691 | 5,701 | (.2%) |
| Non-VFZ | 3,308 | 3,405 | (3%) | 33,867 | 37,333 | (10%) |

As can be seen in Table 5, there was a dramatic decrease in the number of reported violent incidents before and after (from 1,191 to 805) the program was initiated in ‘regular’ VFZ schools. This represents an astounding 32 percent drop in the number of violent incidents reported. Though less dramatic, there was an 8 percent drop in the number of reported violent incidents in Sub-division schools (from 762 to 698). In comparison, the number of violent incidents reported in non-VFZ high schools increased 3%. Similarly, there was a 20 percent decline in the number of reported non-violent incidents for the ‘regular’ VFZ schools, while the

number of such incidents for during this same time period increased slightly. In comparison, the number of non-violent incidents reported by non-VFZ high schools increased by 10%.

[Student Truancy within the Schools](#)

MPS defines truancy as any student with five or more unexcused absences in a semester. This set of data considers whether truancy rates decreased following implementation of the VFZ initiative in the schools. Table 6 below shows the changes in these rates pre- and post-VFZ for ‘regular’ and Sub-division VFZ schools, as compared to the overall MPS rates for grades 9-12.

Table 6. Truancy Rates

| School Cohort | Truancy Rates | | |
|------------------|----------------|-----------------|------------------------------|
| | <i>Pre-VFZ</i> | <i>Post-VFZ</i> | <i>% decrease (increase)</i> |
| Regular VFZ | 82% | 80% | 3% |
| Sub-division VFZ | 89% | 92% | (4%) |
| MPS 9-12 | 67% | 76% | (13%) |

Truancy rates decreased for the ‘regular’ schools and slightly increased for the VFZ schools, while increasing by 13% for MPS high schools.

[Student Suspension within the Schools](#)

This set of outcomes, also drawn from data reported annually by the Milwaukee Public Schools, examines whether student suspension rates decreased following implementation of the VFZ initiative in the schools. Table 7 below shows the changes in these rates pre- and post VFZ for the ‘regular’ VFZ high schools, the sub-division high schools, as compared to the overall MPS rate for grades 9-12.

Table 7. Suspension Rates

| School Cohort | Suspension Rates | | |
|------------------|------------------|-----------------|------------------------------|
| | <i>Pre-VFZ</i> | <i>Post-VFZ</i> | <i>% decrease (increase)</i> |
| Regular VFZ | 60% | 38% | 37% |
| Sub-division VFZ | 51% | 29% | 44% |
| MPS 9-12 | 36% | 38% | (6%) |

Suspension rates decreased sharply for both ‘regular’ VFZ schools and Sub-division schools pre- and post VFZ. As is documented in Table 7, suspension rates shrunk from 60 percent (pre-VFZ) to 38 percent (post-VFZ) in ‘regular’ VFZ schools, a remarkable drop of 37 percent. In a similar fashion, suspensions dropped from 51 percent (pre-VFZ) to 29 percent (post-VFZ) in Sub-division schools, a stunning drop of 44 percent.

Impact on Academic Performance

This final set of outcomes concerns the impact that the VFZ program has, if any, on the academic performance of schools, as measured by the Grade Point Average (GPA) for the school. The purpose of these findings is to determine whether schools show a higher GPA a year after VFZ is implemented. Table 8 shows the findings on changes in GPA reported pre- and post-VFZ for regular and subdivision schools. Modest increases in GPA took place in both ‘regular’ VFZ schools (3.28% increase) and Sub-division schools (4.56%). As stated earlier, academic performance is not the focus of the VFZ initiative. However, it is logical to expect that academic performance, and in this case GPA, might improve as a result of other factors regarding the school environment. The gains in GPA reported below are not dramatic, but may well represent a preliminary salutary by-product of the VFZ.

Table 8: School-wide GPA

| School Cohort | School-wide GPA | | |
|------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| | <i>Pre-VFZ</i> | <i>Post-VFZ</i> | <i>% increase</i> |
| Regular VFZ | 1.51 | 1.56 | 3.28% |
| Sub-division VFZ | 1.48 | 1.54 | 4.56% |
| MPS 9-12 | 1.85 | 1.85 | 0.0% |

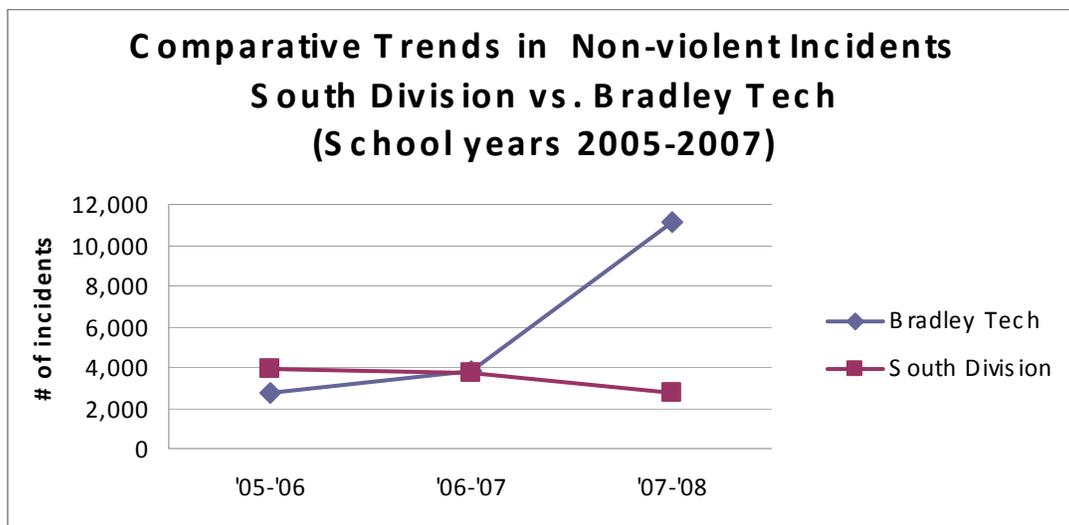
Compared to What?

When researchers evaluate programs, it is not enough to simply compare outcomes before and after an intervention. Stated differently, it is necessary to ask if the pre- and post outcome results are significantly different from a comparable group not receiving the intervention under study. Therefore, we made several comparisons between South Division and

a comparable high school not participating in the VFZ initiative. Bradley Tech is a high school located in the same geographic area and has a student body that demographically is very similar to that of students in South Division high school.

As can be seen in Figure 2, Bradley Tech actually had significantly fewer reports of non-violent incidents than South Division in 2005 ($n=2,740$ and $n=3,927$ respectively), before the launch of the VFZ. The most recent data available from 2007, allow us to document any changes that may have transpired during the time the VFZ was put in place at South Division. Figure 2 reveals the number of non-violent incidents reported at Bradley Tech increased dramatically, while the number of non-violent incidents at South Division dropped significantly ($n= 11,111$ and $n=2,772$) during the same time period. Though we do not have a research design in place that would allow us to address cause and effect relationships, it is compelling nonetheless to observe the impressive differences presented between the two comparable Milwaukee schools.

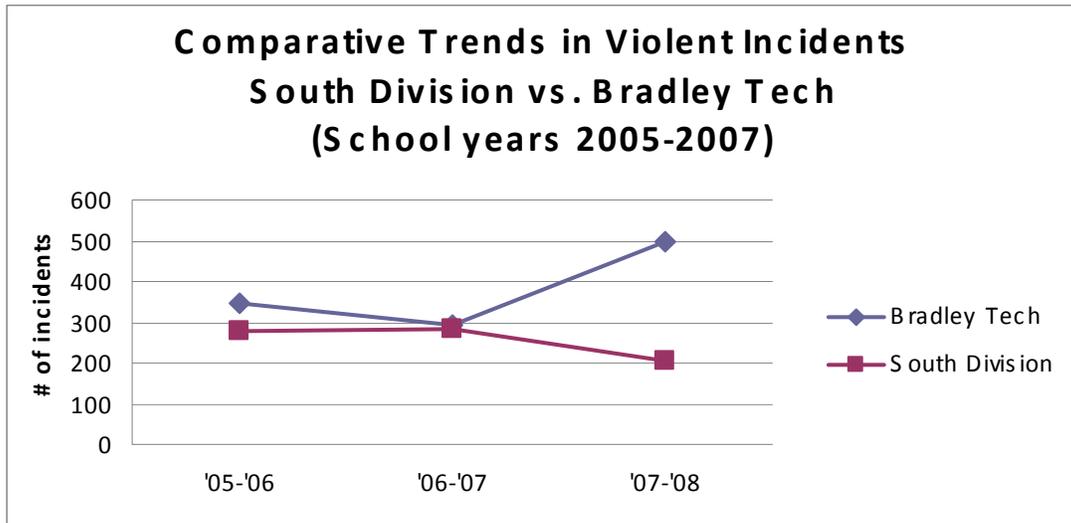
Figure 2. Comparative Trends in Non-Violent Incidents



In Figure 3, we compare the same two schools, but focus on the number of violent incidents reported. Bradley Tech reported more violent incidents than South Division in 2005 ($n=346$ and $n=277$ respectively), before the VFZ initiative. After the VFZ had been in place for a year, the difference in levels of reported violence between the two schools had widened

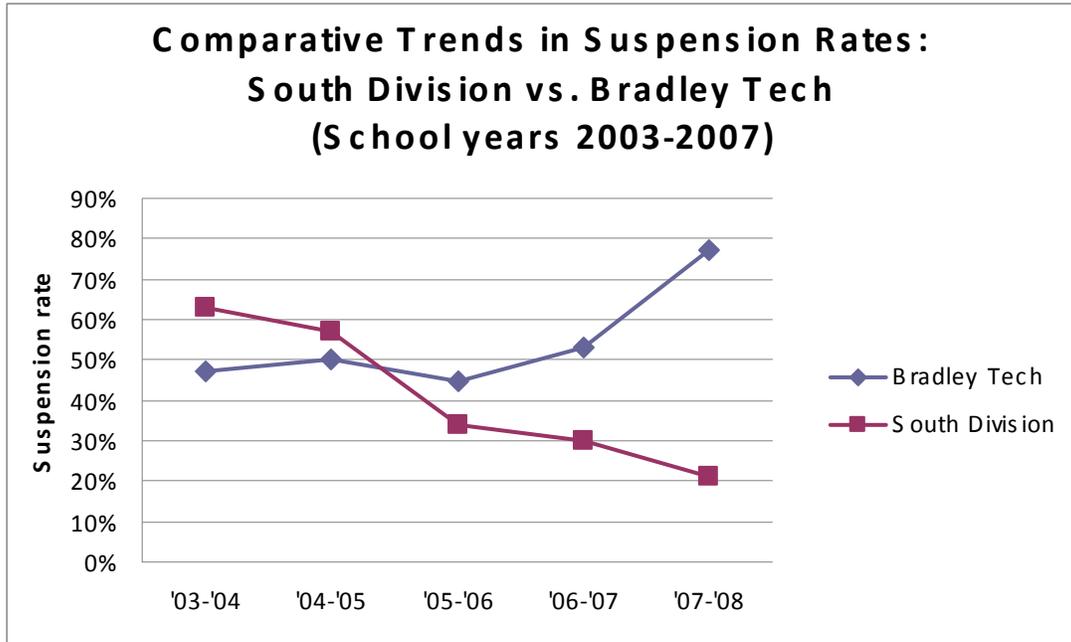
sharply. Not only had violence increased drastically at Bradley Tech, but reports of violence has declined markedly at South Division ($n=496$ and $n=203$ respectively).

Figure 3. Comparative Trends in Violent Incidents



A similar finding is observed when we compare the suspension rates for these same two high schools. With data available dating back to 2003, we see in Figure 4 that South Division had a significantly higher suspension rate than Bradley Tech (63% and 47%). After the implementation of the VFZ initiative at South Division we see extraordinary decreases in suspension rates, while simultaneously observing significantly increasing suspension rates at Bradley Tech (21% and 77% respectively).

Figure 4. Comparative Trends in Suspension



Conclusion

The Violence Free Zone initiative is a youth violence prevention and reduction program located within select middle and high schools across the United States. The VFZ model entails recruiting and training Youth Advisors from the same neighborhoods or with similar experiences as the students in the schools they serve. These Youth Advisors serve several roles, including: hall monitors, mentors, counselors, role models, and ‘peace-makers’ when conflicts flare up in the school. The VFZ was implemented in select schools within the Milwaukee Public School system in 2006.

Interviews with Milwaukee school officials, teachers, and other relevant stakeholders indicate widespread agreement regarding the linkages between the implementation of the VFZ initiative and subsequent improvements in a number of outcome areas. Additionally, climate surveys taken before and after the onset of the VFZ initiative generally confirm both students and parents perceive improvements within the classroom as well as the school environment more generally. In-depth interviews with teachers and administrators support these findings. Indeed, school officials we interviewed were remarkably enthusiastic at the preliminary results of the VFZ in Milwaukee.

An examination of data provided by the Milwaukee Public Schools also tends to point to significant improvements in VFZ schools that are measurable over time. In general, pre- and post measures document VFZ schools tend to have fewer reports of violent and non-violent incidents as well as lower suspension rates. This finding is particularly striking when we compare a VFZ school like South Division, to a comparable non-VFZ school such as Bradley Tech.

In conclusion, through an analysis of qualitative as well as quantitative data, this case study finds preliminary evidence that the VFZ initiative in select Milwaukee high schools has achieved important and salutary benefits over a relatively short period of time. At the same time, it is also important to acknowledge it would be inappropriate to make or draw causal inferences with the limitations of the current study. A much more rigorous and controlled study is necessary before we can realistically talk about cause and effect relationships between interventions like the VFZ and outcomes such as youth violence, suspensions, truancy, and GPA. What we can safely conclude from the current study is that we have found ample evidence of potential linkages between the Milwaukee VFZ initiative and a number of important outcomes. For example, pre- and post VFZ data collected and provided to us by the Milwaukee Public Schools, document the following: (1) climate surveys generally confirm both students and parents perceive classrooms to be safer and the school environment to be more friendly and welcoming; (2) the number of reported violent and non-violent incidents tends to decrease sharply in VFZ schools, while increasing slightly in non-VFZ schools; (3) truancy rates remain rather stable in VFZ schools, but increased substantially in MPS high schools as a whole; (4) suspension rates declined dramatically in VFZ schools and increasing in MPS high schools overall; (5) academic performance (GPA) improved slightly in VFZ schools and remained unchanged for MPS high schools; and (6) when comparing a specific VFZ school like South Division to a comparable non-VFZ school such as Bradley Tech, we find South Division to have substantially lower reports of violent and non-violent incidents, as well as significantly lower suspension rates. Finally, these positive but preliminary results point to the need for a major impact evaluation of the VFZ initiative in Milwaukee as well as other sites around the country.

About the Authors

Byron R. Johnson is Professor of Sociology and Director of the Institute for Studies of Religion (ISR) as well as director of the Program on Prosocial Behavior, both at Baylor University. He is a Senior Fellow at the Witherspoon Institute (Princeton), and Senior Research Scholar at the Institute for Jewish and Community Research (San Francisco). He is chief advisor for the Center for the Study of Religion and Chinese Society, Peking University (Beijing). Before joining the faculty at Baylor University, Johnson directed research centers at Vanderbilt University and the University of Pennsylvania. Professor Johnson is currently conducting a series of empirical studies for the Department of Justice on the role of religion in prosocial youth behavior. He is recognized as a leading authority on the scientific study of religion, the efficacy of faith-based organizations, domestic violence, and criminal justice. Recent publications have examined the impact of faith-based programs on recidivism reduction and prisoner reentry. Along with other ISR colleagues he is completing a series of empirical studies on the religious landscape of China. Professor Johnson is also collaborating with other scholars on several studies of religious intolerance and tolerance in America. Johnson is currently partnering working with the Gallup Organization on a global study addressing religion and spirituality in the world. He has published more than hundred journal articles and book chapters, as well as several books and many research monographs. Johnson's research has been used in consultation with the Department of Justice, Department of Defense, Department of Labor, and the National Institutes of Health.

William Wubbenhorst is Research Fellow at Baylor University's Institute for Studies of Religion and Program on Prosocial Behavior. He serves as a project manager for the Faith Service Forum and is the lead subject matter expert within Macro International, Inc. in the area of faith-based and community initiatives and the establishment partnerships with government at the local, state and federal level. Mr. Wubbenhorst is currently working as project director for training and technical assistance for the US Department of Health and Human Services (USDHHS) for Promoting Responsible Fatherhood. He was also involved in two other contracts relating to review of abstinence education curriculum and promising practices research for federally-funded abstinence education programs. Prior to that, Mr. Wubbenhorst worked on behalf of the US Department of Labor (DOL) and the Corporation for National and Community Service's Americorps*VISTA program on projects related to those agencies' faith-based and community initiatives. For DOL, this work entails supporting the Department's efforts to develop local partnerships between workforce development boards and faith-based and community organizations to better serve hard-to-reach populations with training and employment services. The work for Americorps*VISTA involves an evaluation of the number and types of faith-based and community organization partners, along with selected profiles of model programs, particularly in the area of mentoring children of prisoners. Additionally, Mr. Wubbenhorst worked for 8 years in Massachusetts state government. He has published a number of articles pertaining to Charitable Choice and the Faith-Based/Community Initiative and served as an independent research consultant for the Center for Public Justice, conducting research on Charitable Choice and other related faith-based initiatives. He is currently a Technical Director at Macro, International, Inc.

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