The Bloomberg administration should be commended for their increased efforts to bolster a climate of safety in the New York City public schools. Reports of serious crimes in city schools are down 23% over the past two years, following a national trend. Despite these gains, students in the U.S. ages 12-18 were victims of about 2 million nonfatal crimes of violence or theft at school in 2001, (the last year for which complete statistics are available), and reports of bullying and intimidation rose in schools from 5% of students in 2000 to 8% in 2001. Undoubtedly, much more needs to be done to enhance the climate of safety in our schools.

Operation Impact, a tough, targeted response to school crime, is Mayor Bloomberg’s latest school safety initiative. The program proposes a “bolstering of police resources” as the centerpiece of the plan. The initial phase of this plan has identified 12 problem schools with the worst safety records which will receive the following attention: the number of school safety agents and permanently assigned police officers will be increased; a 150-member NYPD school safety task-force will be convened to focus on problem areas in these schools, monitor their perimeters, and organize truancy sweeps; new school safety intervention teams will be formed to evaluate and revise safety conditions and security procedures; principals at these schools will be held accountable for reductions in crime and/or replaced; and disciplinary procedures for problem-students (detention, suspension, zero-tolerance for serious offenses, and relocation of some problem students to “second opportunity schools”) will be intensified. Additional schools will be targeted as individual school records and conditions change.

Although the application of such security and deterrence measures to schools with poor safety records can be effective for those schools in the short-term, such policies suffer from the following drawbacks:

- **They discourage accurate reporting of school violence.** Paradoxically, the use of school safety records to identify and target problem schools can deter school administrators from accurately reporting incidents in their schools. In the past, school safety agents have reported being encouraged by some administrators not to report serious incidents on school grounds out of concern for the schools reputation. Thus, such strategies can increase the dis-incentive for accurate reporting, and result in an apparent but erroneous decrease in reports of violence in schools.

- **They oversimplify the problem.** Using reports of school crime as the primary index of school safety misses the broader context of unsafe school climates, which include: physical and psychological bullying and intimidation in schools, ineffectual responses from teachers and school officials, the presence of drugs and weapons in schools, crimes and acts of intimidation which occur in transit to and from schools, high rates of alienation and suicide amongst students, as well as countless other incidents of humiliation, harassment, and crime that go unreported. Violence and insecurity are complex phenomena; they have many sources and manifest in a variety of ways. Relying on existing indicators such as crime and incident reports may be a convenient means of assessing problems, but it often leads to a misunderstanding of the nature of the problems around safety in schools.

- **They offer broad, general solutions to poorly defined, local problems.** Top-down mandates from the Office of the Mayor and the Department of Education for addressing local problems in schools and specific cases of “problem students” are often well-intentioned and terribly misguided. The specific circumstances and constraints faced by individual schools when attempting to establish safe learning environments and respond to troubled youth are best understood by the teachers, families, and administrators living and working in these settings. Similarly, workable and sustainable solutions to local challenges must be crafted by those close to the problems. Yes, school leaders should be held accountable for keeping their schools safe, but
only when the City and State provide the expertise and training at the local level to adequately access the nature of the problems faced, and supply the resources to respond effectively.

- **They emphasize short-term solutions to long-term (and changing) problems.** Crisis responses to particularly dangerous school environments make good sense. However they do not begin to address the root causes of violence and intimidation in our schools. Heightened surveillance and security measures are therefore a necessary but insufficient response. Too often, our political leaders are attracted to short-term, hard-line solutions to complex problems because of the likelihood that they will show some immediate effect, and will signal to their constituents that they are in control of a difficult situation. Such responses are only useful when they are accompanied by more considered responses which target the complex underlying conditions and causes of school violence.

- **They highlight containment and deterrence while neglecting prevention, support, and care.** There are no simple solutions to the problem of violence and insecurity in America’s public schools. How can there be in a country where the rate of firearm deaths among children under age 15 is almost 12 times higher than in 25 other industrialized countries combined. Where by the time the average child completes elementary school, he or she will have witnessed more than 100,000 acts of violence on TV. Child abuse and neglect, a culture of violence, alcohol and drug abuse, economic and social injustice, the easy availability of weapons, and many other factors contribute to the high occurrence of interpersonal conflict, bullying, and violence, and are largely not under school control. Increasing police resources is one type of response, but when offered as a plan’s “centerpiece” it inadvertently sends a message to youth: Ultimately, coercion prevails.

  Nevertheless, there are additional approaches that schools and communities can take to preventing violence and alienation and counteracting the harmful influences emanating from outside the school. For instance, violent youth crime peaks between 3 and 6 o’clock in the afternoon. After-school programs during these hours keep children safe and out of trouble. Innovative programs in schools around the country combine violence prevention, peace education, conflict resolution, and social-emotional learning initiatives with training in social organizing and social action for students, and even in self-defense. Many schools go beyond student-focused activities and work systemically; targeting school pedagogies, curriculum, disciplinary and grievance systems, and providing training and coaching for the adults in the schools as well. Such initiatives are aimed at establishing a school climate which is not only secure, but which engages and supports children within a caring community.

  Bolstering police resources is only one step toward creating more peaceful public schools. A comprehensive school safety program must enhance traditional security and disciplinary procedures by providing local officials with the expertise and resources to face, with persistence and innovation, the ongoing challenges of violence and alienation in our schools.

*Peter T. Coleman is Director of the International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution at Teachers College, Columbia University*