Building a Safe School: Evaluation Findings

from Clearview Avenue

Elementary School

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Executive Summary

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An in-depth evaluation was completed with Clearview Avenue Elementary School in response to a request from the school's administration in order to guide them in their efforts to provide a safer learning environment for their students. Four specific questions were asked during the evaluation: 1) To what extent did planned activities and strategies achieve a safe school and promote a positive educational climate, 2) Were the activities effective for all participants, 3) Which components were most effective, 4) What barriers were encountered and to what extent were they overcome? To answer these questions, data were analyzed including pre and post administration of the *School Safety Survey*, focus groups completed with students, staff and parents, interviews carried out with key informants, record reviews, and other observational data.

In response to question 1, parents, teachers and students indicated that the interventions and activities put into place by school staff had resulted in a safer learning environment and improved school climate. In response to question 2, teachers and students reported that the lack of parental support for disciplinary issues continued to impact the educational climate at the school, and that teasing and bullying persisted despite current efforts. Because of the simultaneous implementation of various programs, and the overlap in features of those programs, question 3 was difficult to answer; however, overall their impact appeared to create positive changes within the school. Demographic risk factors and the physical location of the school accounted for the largest barriers faced by Clearview and were being addressed by the programs and policies put into place by the administration. In fact, disciplinary referrals and grade retention had decreased compared to previous years. School location, because of the openness of

the campus and location adjacent to a busy intersection, continues to pose problems with respect

to safety. Recommendations included increased efforts to involve parents and other adults in the

community to help to create a safer school environment and improved climate and

implementation of a "bully-proofing" intervention for students at all grade levels.

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Introduction

Safety in schools is a major concern shared by educators, parents, students, and the community. With the recent wake of violent incidents across America's schools, issues of school safety have become absolute priorities for many schools and communities. Clearview Avenue Elementary School (Clearview), located in St. Petersburg, Florida is one such school, where stakeholders (parents, community, and school staff) have combined their efforts to create a safe learning environment for students. The following document reports evaluation findings of these efforts, which may be useful to Clearview, as well as other schools, committed to achieving better and safer schools.

Pinellas County Schools is the seventh largest school district in Florida and the twenty-first largest in the nation, with 149 schools serving over 110,000 students. In the fall of 1999, Pinellas County Schools was one of 50 school districts in the United States awarded the Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative (SS/HSI), a federal grant award intended to strengthen community partnerships and improve prevention and intervention efforts within schools and their communities. Included within this initiative were a number of school-based activities to promote positive development, reduce violence and substance abuse, and create an environment where teachers can teach and children can learn. Clearview is one of the schools benefiting from this initiative.

Clearview, built in 1931, is one of the older schools in Pinellas County. With an expansion from 4 classrooms to 33, Clearview now houses 653 students. Located in one of the long-established neighborhoods of St. Petersburg, Clearview is situated on a major thoroughfare

connecting two highways. During school hours, commuter traffic remains consistently heavy between these two major thoroughfares.

Sixty-nine percent of the students at Clearview receive free or reduced lunch, an indicator of low income or poverty. Other risk factors include the facts that 20% of the students are in special education (not including the gifted program), 6.7% have limited English proficiency, and 40% are minorities. The school also has a 42% mobility rate.

For the school year 2000 and again in 2001, Clearview achieved a "C" rating from the Florida Department of Education (FL-DOE), based upon the state grading criteria. Forty-six percent of their students taking the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) scored in the lowest percentile in reading according to the state report published by FL-DOE. In order to gain a more complete understanding of how their school was doing, rather than just what was reflected by demographic statistics and the FL-DOE grading, the Clearview administration invited the FMHI evaluation team to conduct a site evaluation with special emphasis on school safety.

Led by their principal and assistant principal, Clearview has developed a plan intended to promote the success and development of all children. As stated by the assistant principal in an initial interview: "We believe in a student achievement model, which grades children upon their own improvement". Towards that end, Clearview's School Improvement Plan for 2000 included a number of goals and objectives to attain greater student achievement and a safer learning environment. Their mission statement reads "Clearview Avenue Elementary School, with the support of family and community, will help students develop problem-solving, communication, and literacy skills in a positive, safe environment in preparation for life-long learning". This

report focuses on Clearview's accomplishments towards achieving a safe learning environment over the course of the year.

Evaluation Questions

The questions addressed by this evaluation are:

1. To what extent did planned activities and strategies achieve a safe school and promote a positive educational climate?

2. Were the activities effective for all participants?

3. Which components were most effective?

4. What barriers were encountered and to what extent were they overcome?

Method

A mixed methods design for the evaluation was selected to provide a more comprehensive way of the understanding Clearview's accomplishments, rather than basing results on only quantitative techniques. Once the evaluation questions were determined, several methods were selected for data collection. These included a review of district data, pre- and post-intervention administration of the School Safety Survey (Massey, Armstrong, & Santoro, 2000), a series of focus groups with students, staff, and parents, informant interviews, record reviews, and observational data. These methods were selected because they yield valid and reliable findings that are useful to stakeholders (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). A matrix of the evaluation questions, sources of information, and data collection methods follows:

Question	Sources of Information	Data Collection Methods
To what extent did planned activities and strategies achieve a safe school and promote a positive educational climate?	Students, faculty and staff, parents, members of School Advisory Council (SAC), Clearview Goal B Workgroup, 2000-2001 School Improvement Plan (SIP), Clearview WebPages, District MIS	Focus groups with students, faculty, parents, and members of SAC; surveys of faculty and staff; participant observation of Clearview Goal B Workgroup; interviews with administration; examination of SIP, WebPages, and MIS data file
Were the activities effective for all participants?	Students, faculty and staff, parents, members of School Advisory Council (SAC), District MIS	Focus groups with students, faculty, parents, and members of SAC; surveys of faculty and staff; participant observation of Clearview Goal B Workgroup; and MIS data file
Which components were most effective?	Students, faculty and staff, parents, members of School Advisory Council (SAC), District MIS	Focus groups with students, faculty, parents, and members of SAC; surveys of faculty and staff; participant observation of Clearview Goal B Workgroup; and MIS data file
What barriers were encountered and to what extent were they overcome?	Students, faculty and staff, parents, members of School Advisory Council (SAC), District MIS	Focus groups with students, faculty, parents, and members of SAC; surveys of faculty and staff; participant observation of Clearview Goal B Workgroup; and MIS data file

Results

Evaluation findings will be presented for each question. These findings are derived from multiple sources of information collected over the 2000 school year in an attempt to tell what has been accomplished.

1. To what extent did planned activities and strategies achieve a safe school and promote a positive educational climate?

A number of activities are being implemented at Clearview to both achieve a safe school and promote a positive educational climate. Among those thought to be most effective are "Stop and

Think" from the Skillstreaming Curriculum (McGinnis & Goldstein, 1984), High Five (Faligowski, 1997), and Second Step: A Violence Prevention Curriculum (Committee for Children, 1997). These skill-building programs are designed to improve prosocial behavior, increase empathy, and enhance problem-solving skills. In addition, the school-wide positive reinforcement system and often-mentioned "Eagle Notes", which provided positive attention to students, contributed to positive feelings about being in school.

The students overwhelmingly reported that they felt safe at school and that they enjoyed coming to school. Eighty-one percent of the staff rated their safety as safe or very safe at Clearview, while they rated other schools in the district as less safe. Parents concurred that both they and their children felt safe at school, however many voiced concerns about the heavy traffic surrounding the school, especially during morning drop-off and afternoon dismissal. Teachers were more aware of policies and procedures for safety than were students or parents, and these professionals indicated that they felt secure due to strong administrative support.

2. *Were the activities effective for all participants?*

The data indicate decreased numbers of discipline referrals (see Figures 1-3) and fewer students retained than in the previous year. While this news is hopeful, a number of issues were identified that continue to present challenges. Teasing and bullying, insufficient parental support for discipline, and low parental involvement were identified as key problems. Teachers and students in the focus groups agreed that teasing and bullying were significant problems for many students attending Clearview. A number of students shared personal experiences of being the victims of bullying and reported continuing to feel afraid. "Teasing and bullying" were identified as the most severe problems by staff members completing the School Safety Survey (see Figure 4).

Students and teachers agreed that discipline problems at school were related to a lack of parental support in addressing those problems. Surprisingly, students suggested parents should discipline their children more often. They were unhappy when disruptive behaviors by other students interfered with their school day. This lack of parental support in addressing discipline problems was rated as a serious or an extreme problem by forty-one percent of the teachers surveyed. Teachers in the focus group related several personal anecdotes of situations they had experienced when parents either did not offer support or blamed them for their child's behavior problems.

Thirty-three percent of the staff surveyed reported that insufficient parental involvement at school was a serious or extreme problem. The focus groups unanimously agreed that there was a lack of parental involvement at school. Students additionally suggested that both parents and teachers needed to work more closely together to supervise students in order to protect them from teasing and harassment. Further, they reported that adults often dismissed or ignored students when they tried to get help. Teachers suggested that adults needed to set better examples for children to follow in the school, home, and community. While goals in the school improvement plan addressed increasing parental and community involvement, participants reported that they had achieved less success than hoped.

3. Which components were most effective?

This was the most difficult question to answer because of the simultaneous implementation of many of the programs and policies. In addition, there is an overlap in the features of the programs. For example, skill building and problem solving are evident in both the *Skill Streaming* and *Second Step* curricula. One indicator of change produced from implementation of these programs is the language that is used by students, staff, and families. For example, parents

reported that they now remind their students to "Stop and Think" when they are about to make bad choices. Teachers also remind students of choices and personal responsibility, again, an indicator that the interventions are influencing the culture of the school.

   4. What barriers were encountered and to what extent were they overcome?

   Demographic risk factors and school location appear to be the largest barriers encountered by Clearview. With respect to risk factors, although the most recent school year produced an increase in the number of low-income students, there was a substantial decrease in the number of disciplinary referrals and grade retention. This suggests that interventions to improve behavior and academics are producing positive results.

   However, the location of the school continues to pose a threat to safety. Survey respondents and focus group participants agreed that they felt less safe outside of the school building. Busy traffic surrounding the school continues to present a danger to students, even with supervision during the most critical times. Along with this fear are worries about the community surrounding the school, especially in regards to children walking to and from school. The children also reported a fear of intruders coming into the school because of the open campus. Their fears were exaggerated by the safety drills, referred to as "lock-down" procedures. Several teachers reported safety concerns of their own in regards to the lock-down procedures. In fact, practicing lock-down drills made students and staff alike feel less, rather than more, safe at school.

Discussion

   Clearview has committed to creating a safe and nurturing school environment where children can learn and teachers can teach. They have implemented a number of programs intended to produce a safe and high-quality educational program. They have documented decreases in disciplinary referrals and improved academic performances, despite increases in the

numbers of at-risk children. They have implemented safety measures and procedures due to the physical openness and location of their building. The staff seem genuinely committed to improving the quality and positive culture of the school.

A culture change is evidenced in students, staff, and parents, in their use of problem solving language, such as "Stop and Think" that focus on positive choices and personal responsibility. Appropriate behavior is encouraged and reinforced throughout the school. Everyone seems to know about the "Eagle Notes", one strategy to reinforce appropriate behavior. The combined impact from all of these efforts has lead to a safer, more caring school environment.

However, teasing and bullying were identified as serious problems, and several of the students reported that they were or had been victims. These problems occurred both on the school grounds and in the community, especially when students walked to and from school. Teasing and bullying can have a life-long impact on both the bully and the victim (Goodman, 2001), and certainly will interfere with efforts to create a safe school environment at Clearview.

Research indicates that almost 30 percent of children in the United States are affected by bullying, sometimes on a daily basis (Nansel, Overpeck, & Pilla 2001). In this respect, the reports of bullying at Clearview mirror the rest of the nation. There are several factors thought to contribute to bullying behavior, including higher levels of anger, unhappiness at school, impulsivity, depression, a lack of belonging at school, dislike of school, and problems at home (Garrity, Jens, & Porter, 1996). Those most likely to become victims tend to be more anxious, are seen as different, awkward, or immature, are physically weak, lack social skills, and have fewer friends (Kumpulainen, Ranen, & Hettonen, 1998). The lack of supervision and inadequate limit setting, both at home and at school, contribute to the bullying problem.

Increasing parental support and involvement seems to be an essential next step as Clearview continues to promote the success and development of all of its students. A number of school intervention programs have demonstrated effectiveness in stemming the tide of bullying. It is essential that adults, including parents, teachers, and community members, become involved in this effort. We propose the initiation of a comprehensive intervention for bullying and teasing that focuses on the bully, the victim, the school and home environments, such as those recommended by the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence (2001). Only when the most important adults in a child's world (teachers and parents) begin to work together, will children be safe and able to achieve. As the staff at Clearview continue in efforts to create a safe learning environment for their students, their challenge will be in involving parents and the community in this mission.

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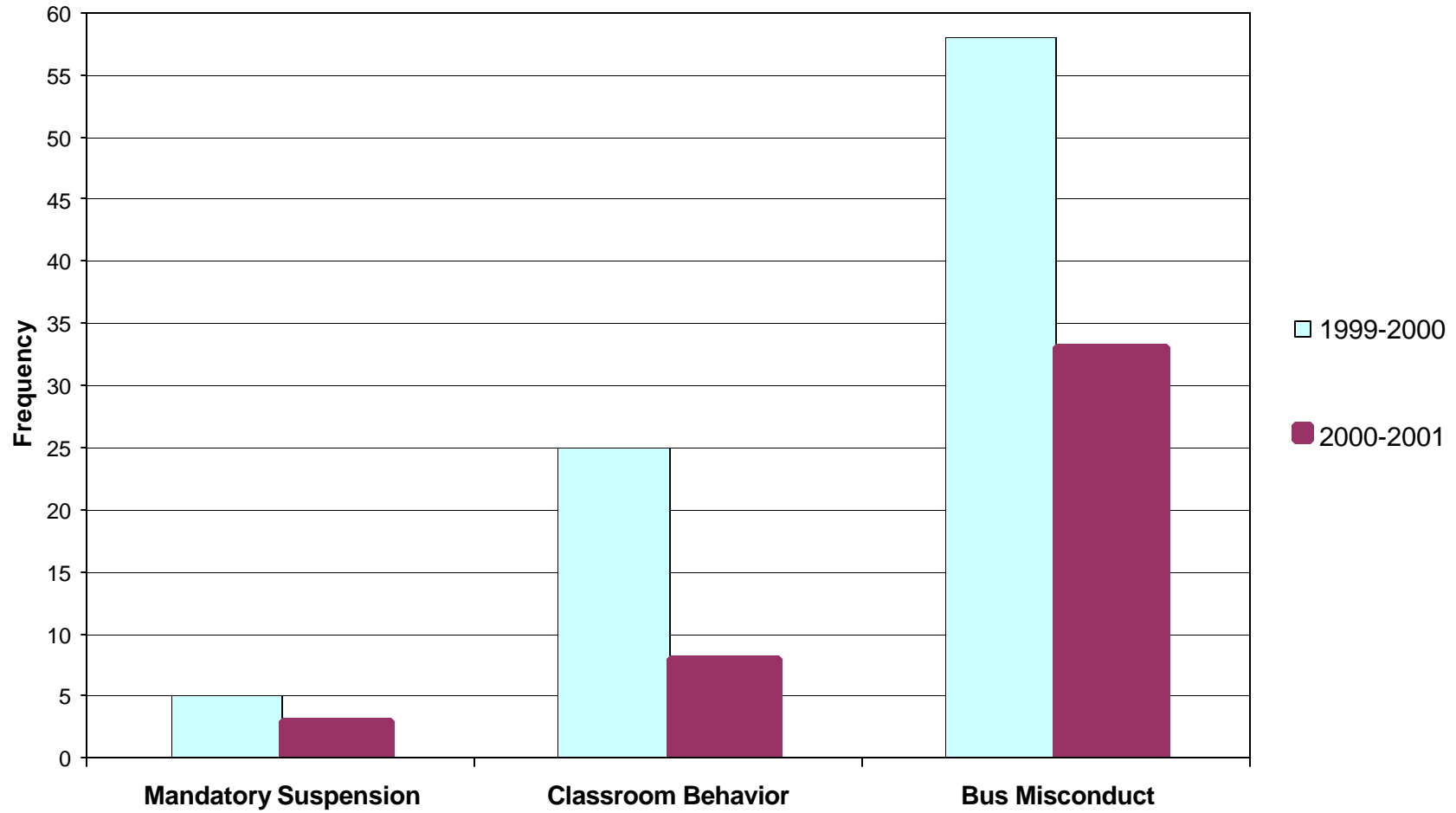**Figure 1**

Disciplinary Referrals by Type
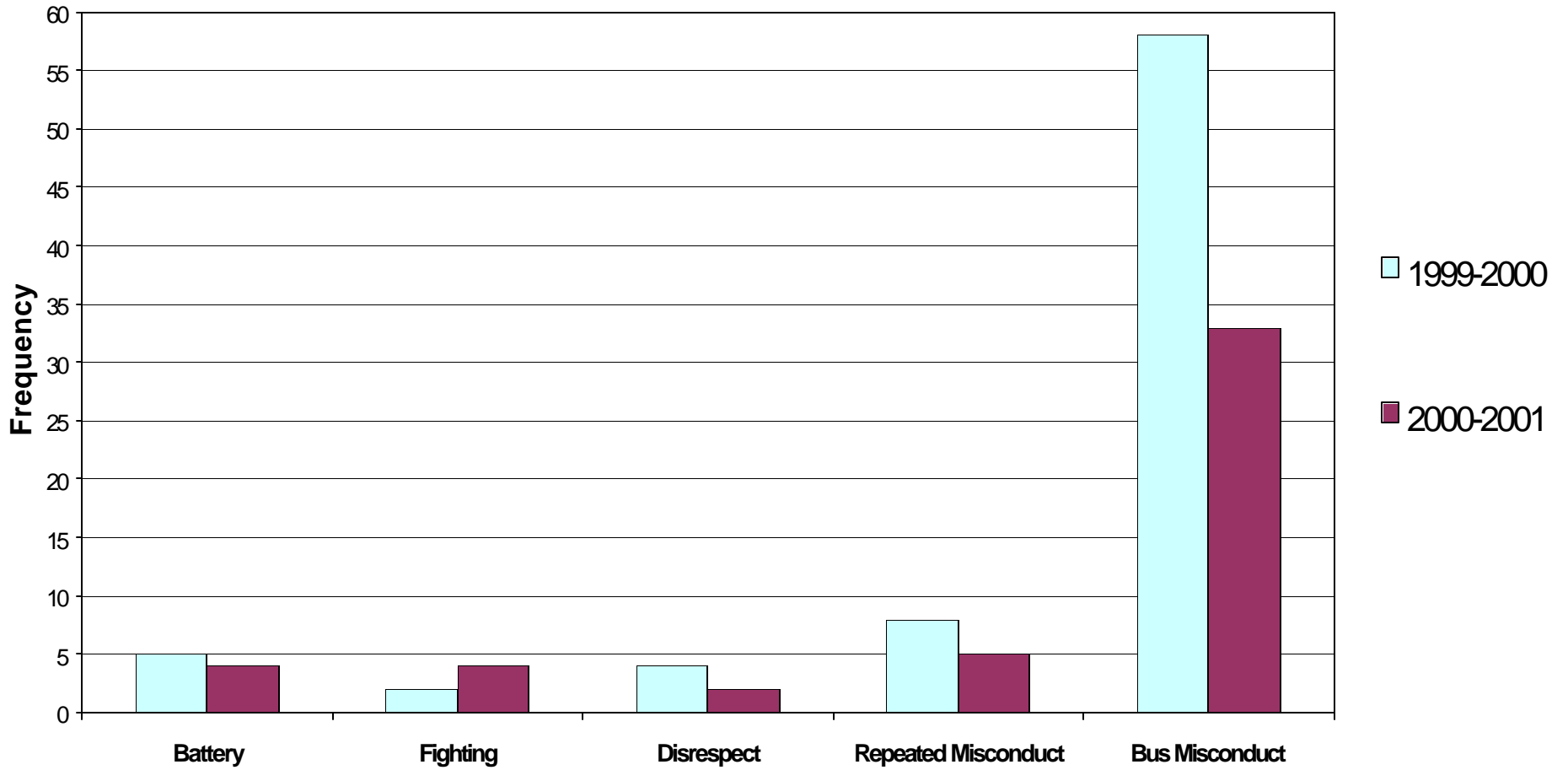
Figure 2
Disciplinary Referrals by Action Category
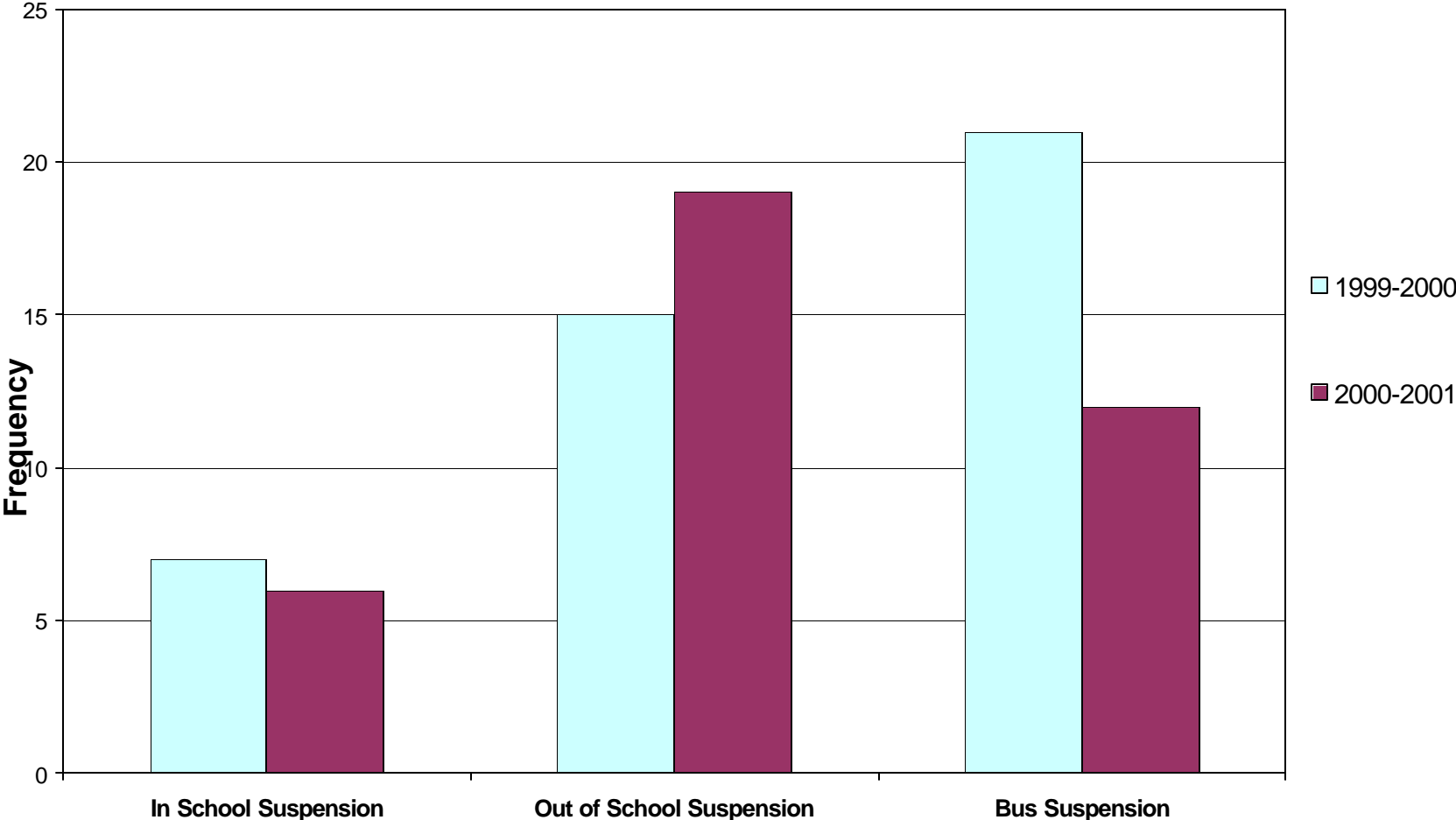
Figure 3
Disciplinary Referrals by Category

Figure 4
Clearview Elementary - Staff's Perceptions of School Safety