

# THE FACILITATOR<sup>sm</sup>

## Teen Think Tanks™

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### Electronic Facilitation and School Violence

Electronic facilitation may be the key to eliminating violence from our schools. This premise has been explored in a convincing fashion by an expert facilitator of electronic meetings ... and he engaged the real experts on the subject: a number of teenagers who are exposed daily to possible violent behavior in a number of public schools. The concept of using an electronic meeting to engage students in an effort to identify the causes and prevention of violence in schools has been called a Teen Think Tank™.

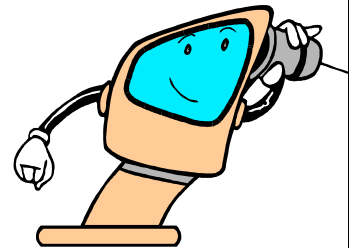
### What is a Teen Think Tank?

The Teen Think Tank is an approach and process pioneered by Brice Marsh, a computer scientist working at NASA's Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville, Alabama. A former school teacher and IBM engineer, he observed, "This high-tech / low-touch world has exaggerated the disconnect between human compassion and caution. Many American citizens of all ages now refrain from offering aid or comfort — or showing even the slightest gesture of acceptance or support to others — for fear of the consequences. Too often, it's our young people who feel the greatest impact from this dilemma; and they feel powerless to do anything about it. Sometimes their frustration or exasperation leads to violent behavior. The Teen Think Tank is an innovative attempt to give teenagers an opportunity to participate constructively in combating violence in our public schools."

### The Teen Think Tank Experiment

Is it possible to engage teenagers in a serious effort to identify the root causes of school violence and to

develop strategies to deal with it? If so, will computer-aided group decision support tools add value to the process? Those were the questions addressed by the first Teen Think Tank on School Violence. While this was neither a formal nor a scientific treatment of the subject, the results of the initial experiment were overwhelmingly impressive. Using the GroupSystems Electronic Meeting System (EMS), sixteen teenagers grappled with the issue of school violence and identified more than 800 different ways to predict, prevent, avoid, protect, react, eliminate, or cope with youth violence. After brainstorming for ideas, they also used EMS to categorize, prioritize, and to reach consensus about their best ideas. Then they



developed teen recommendations for students, parents, teachers, school administrators, and law enforcement officers. This was all accomplished in two EMS sessions; and none of the students had any prior knowledge or experience with EMS.

### What are the benefits of the Teen Think Tank?

- Teens feel they are actively involved with identifying and solving their own issues.
- Local officials, parents, school administrators and others are provided with intimate "hands-on" information on these issues.
- Electronic meeting software provides an opportunity to collect and document the teens' comments in minimal time at a maximum comfort level.

### What makes a successful Teen Think Tank?

- Visual government, school board, school administration, and parental support

**"Is it possible to engage teenagers in a serious effort to identify the root causes of school violence....?"**



- Commitment by these same adults to follow-through on Teen Think Tank results within a several-week timeframe
- Specific agenda and objective
- Selection of appropriate students
- Press coverage

### How have Teen Think Tanks been used?

In July of 1998 in Birmingham, Alabama, students brainstormed on a number of questions relating to school violence and generated more than 800 ideas.

The students used an electronic meeting system (EMS) to brainstorm, categorize, prioritize, select and to reach consensus about their best ideas summarized below.

1. "We must deal with the causes of violence rather than building bigger, stronger walls to protect ourselves from violence."
2. "Morality and values must be taught to children at home, in school, and in the community."
3. "Students must be treated with respect, fairness, courtesy, and acceptance by teachers and administrators."
4. "Violence must be dealt with quickly, fairly, and with significant consequences for the offender."
5. "This Think Tank project should be continued with other groups."

In June 1999, another group of students from Birmingham-area schools were asked to brainstorm about positive and negative influences that could impact their attitudes and behavior. The students were asked to distinguish between those things that "build you up, encourage you, cultivate self-esteem, or build confidence" and those things that "tear you down, depress

you, irritate you, frustrate you" or possibly could cause a teenager to resort to violent behavior. Some of the positive influences they identified included morality and ethics, supportive parents, and having true friends. The top negative influences included parental neglect, lack of discipline and respect for others, and rejection by peers.

Since then, these Teen Think Tanks, follow-up sessions, presentations and action planning have gained the support of Alabama's former and current governors, its US senator and Attorney General as well as two congressmen.

In May 1999, a Teen Think Tank took place in Sacramento shortly after a student had been beaten up on campus. Here the focus was on the causes and solutions to this very real issue of school violence. The Sacramento teens prioritized indifferent parents, drugs, racism, and availability of weapons as their top 4 reasons for youth violence. When asked what to do to make schools safer, the students identified that they needed more people they could turn to but that trusting these same adults was a big concern. Sacramento school officials are now in the process of implementing some of the suggestions.

### What the teens said about the Teen Think Tank and electronic brainstorming:

"I've really enjoyed working on this topic of school violence without having to argue my side in order to get a word in. Much time was definitely saved in the process..."

"As a shy person, I really liked the anonymity of the (software) program which allowed me to contribute to the discussion a lot - something I would normally be hesitant to do."

"I am a very opinionated person, and naturally, I think my views on things are correct. I found this process ideally suited for dealing with people that are so stubborn. The anonymous voting allows for the best idea, as viewed by the majority, to prevail."

**"...I really liked the anonymity of the (software) program which allowed me to contribute to the discussion....."**

**Who is involved in the Teen Think Tank?**

- Student mix
- 50% average students
- 25% high achieving students
- 25% at-risk students
- Neutral Facilitator (to run process)
- Technographer (to run software)
- Appropriate school administrators
- Other adults as appropriate

### What makes the Teen Think Tank different?

- The Think Tank uses electronic brainstorming to provide a non-threatening environment for teens to feel free sharing potentially sensitive information.
- The teens have an opportunity to anonymously express their concerns and suggestions without fear of humiliation or judgment by others.
- Technology allows each of the students to input ideas simultaneously in a local computer network. Experience indicates that the number and quality of ideas is superior to previous, non-technical approaches.
- The electronic meeting software includes a robust set of tools to classify, categorize, prioritize and select the very best ideas based on group consensus.
- Local officials are asked to provide visible support such as letters or opening remarks for this group of students, emphasizing the importance of this Teen Think Tank and committing to use the results in shaping local politics.

“This process is ... immensely beneficial because it allows many options to be explored simultaneously. In turn, one person’s idea can trigger a useful solution. People can truly expand on ideas, and develop them to the fullest potential.”

Would the students do it again? Without exception.

Would the organizers do it again? You bet!

One of the students remarked, “Let’s have a national teen task force — the possibilities are endless!”

### In Conclusion...

One person observed: “Parents are too busy, teachers have become fearful - of students, violent acts, lawsuits, etc. - and students feel they have become anonymous captives within a highly ‘de-personalized’ public school system.”

Still another teenager concluded: “The emphasis in society needs to be changed from the heroes being the

people who are stronger-faster-tougher to those who are compassionate, intelligent, and those who contribute to society.”

Congressman Bud Cramer, (D) Alabama, endorsed the Teen Think Tank: “I give my full support to the Teen Think Tank on School Violence

program. This ... is a great asset to our schools and community. It demonstrates how the community and students are working together to put an end to acts of violence in our school systems. This program is an effective tool for our tomorrow.”

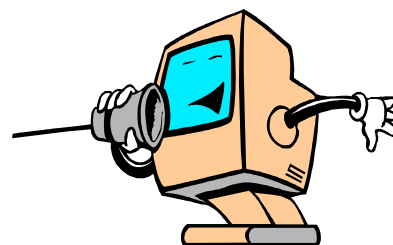
### How do I find out more or host a Teen Think Tank?

Results from a number of the Teen Think Tanks have been posted on the Internet. You may view them at <http://www.teenthinktanks.com>.

If you contact Brice Marsh at 256.772.3631 or [bmarsh@csc.com](mailto:bmarsh@csc.com) or Susan Nurre at 972.243.1356 or [snurre@TheFacilitator.com](mailto:snurre@TheFacilitator.com), they can help you determine how to plan and conduct a Teen Think Tank in your area.

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*Editor's Note: Brice F. Marsh's white paper, "Using GroupSystems to Facilitate a Teen Think Tank on School Violence" was nominated for best paper at the '99 Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences (HICSS) and received an outstanding presentation award at the 99 GroupSystems Worldwide Conference.*



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