

# INTRODUCTION OF A HUNTER SAFETY EDUCATION PROGRAM INTO THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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It is agreed that hunter safety education is an effective tool in reducing firearms accidents. The question is, "How do we make the best use of this tool?" Who, what, when and where have been used as the basic criteria for a news release. We can adapt this formula for introducing hunter education into our public schools.

We, as coordinators, are prone to view this task as statewide in scope, and we will address ourselves to this dimension in our discussion for the present.

WHO is transposed into age groups — junior high, high school or both? This is only a suggestion and should be used as such — start with the junior high age level. No, I'm not suggesting we write-off the older students, but for now you must work with a known number of students in setting goals for the first year and for longer range planning and there are some very good reasons in favor of this age group. Interest, receptiveness and acceptability are among the reasons. This age group is fascinated by firearms, and our instruction should be received before bad habits in gun handling are acquired. We are teaching an attitude, and again, interest and acceptability are of prime importance.

WHAT:NAAHSC Basic Six-Hour Course. No compromise or shortcuts can be accepted in setting up a school program. We refuse to teach a course if the time segments do not meet or exceed the 6 hour minimum. A change in the presentation of your course is not needed for acceptance in the school system but keep your standards high.

WHERE: Starting into schools can be a trying experience, so make this decision with your program in mind. Pick a school that has a rural make-up, a good hunting area and has hunting as a part of its life style. Stay away from areas that have a high anti-hunting sentiment. Also, pick a school in which the local administrator will welcome your efforts.

WHEN: We all know that acceptance to the hunter safety program is greatest during the fall hunting season. However many things can interrupt fall scheduling — football games, homecoming, etc. After consideration of the problems, January, February or March may be a better choice of when to start.

- (1) Captive audience — Our program is aimed at our youth and nowhere are there more children than in the schools.
- (2) Classroom availability — Again, no problem.
- (3) Locations — Schools are everywhere.
- (4) Meeting dates — Preferably you will be using prime school hours.
- (5) Transportation of students — Non-existent if regular school hours are used.
- (6) Audiovisual equipment is on site so that your whole list of teaching aids can be utilized.
- (7) Instructor recruitment — Interested teachers make good volunteer instructors.

These are just a few of the positive aspects of hunter safety in school concepts.

The negative side must be considered and an all-out effort made to minimize the effects:

- (1) Anti-gun/anti-hunting groups can cause a problem. My advice is to handle this one with kid gloves. Don't let your zeal get you in over your head.
- (2) Takeover of hunter safety education by educators — After 10 years in the public schools in West Virginia, this problem has not developed.
- (3) Scheduling — Must be flexible to meet the school's requirements and not compromise your program.
- (4) Logistics — The sheer weight of supplying manuals, patches, registration forms, can get to you. Planning is the key to this pitfall.
- (5) Instructors — Make use of department personnel and use your best instructors.

Entering into the schools may cause some apprehension on your part as to dealing with highly educated people that are administrators for the state, county and local school system.

I have found that acceptance by these individuals is universal and in good faith. All of the educators are interested in the environment and here you are a living example of someone who is employed in this field. Questions will abound and you find many will admire you for your chosen endeavor.

While your goal may be to train every eighth grader annually, you must start out with 1 school. Make your growth slowly at first then expand as instructors, finances and students dictate.

I would like to make a few observations that have been of great help in West Virginia's school programming. Sell your program honestly and sincerely to the State Board of Education and to its physical education specialists. Talk to the county school superintendents about your program. Stress the safety aspects, it will help sell yourself and your program. Seek their advice and counsel, and above all, be professional in your association with everyone involved in the school system.

Your efforts in the school need not stop with hunter safety in the junior highs -- you may want to expand to the BB gun program for the elementary schools or help your high schools develop a shooting sports program. West Virginia has a pilot shooting program in 22 high schools and 4 colleges at the present.

Adult education is an excellent spot for starting classes in an anti-gun area. The students come to you because they have the need and interest.

The schools are 1 tool to get the job accomplished and a first-class state program will make use of schools along with sportsmen's clubs, volunteers and other means of presenting your program to your citizens.