SCHOOL CLIMATE AND BULLYING PREVENTION

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Schools can implement effective bully prevention efforts through the following promising strategies:

1. Ensure leadership supports comprehensive efforts.

2. Engage all stakeholders, from assessment of issues to implementation of strategies.

3. Create and sustain systemic strategies designed to promote a safe, supportive prosocially-informed climate of social responsibility .

4. Integrate and sustain quality teaching and learning.

5. Focus on one-on-one/ relational practices.

Overview

School climate reform, an evidence-based strategy, supports K-12 students, school personnel, parents/guardians and community members learning and working together to promote pro-social education. Done well, these efforts will result in even safer, more supportive, engaging, helpfully challenging and harmonious schools. The U.S. Department of Education, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, the Institute for Educational Sciences, President Obama's Bully Prevention Partnership, the US Departments of Justice and Education's School Discipline Consensus project, a growing number of State Departments of Education and foreign educational ministries support and/or endorse school climate renewal as a strategy to increase student learning and achievement, enhance school connectedness, reduce high school dropout rates, prevent bullying and other forms of violence, and enhance teacher retention rates.

School Climate and Effective Bully Prevention Efforts[1]

Bully-victim-bystander and/or perpetrator[2]-target-witness behavior is a widespread public health problem that undermines all children's ability to develop in healthy ways and compromises

[1] This brief grows out of work that we have detailed in the past resources: Devine & Cohen, 2007; Eyman & Cohen, 2009; Cohen, in press; Cohen, Espelage, Twemlow & Berkowitz (submitted for publication consideration) and Freiberg, 2010; Upstander Alliance/BullyBust: www.schoolclimate.org/bullybust/upstander.

[2] Defining and hence, understanding "bully" and "victim" behavior is complicated and challenging (Freiberg, 2010). Scholars sometimes define "bullying" as (i) intentional acts that are carried out by a person or group (ii) who has more power than the target of this behavior. However, educators "on the ground" often have difficulty discerning intent and/or power relationships. Every one of the 49 state anti-bullying laws has a unique definition of bullying. "Bullying," no matter how it is defined, is about inappropriate behaviors (words and deeds). We use the terms bully and perpetrator as well as "victim" and "target" interchangeably. And, we suggest it is most helpful to talk about "mean, cruel and/or bullying behaviors."

learning (U.S. Department of Education and Human Services, 2012). A generation's worth of media coverage of suicides and rampage shootings claim that they, in part, were caused by "bullying," and have influenced forty-nine (49) states in America to pass anti-bullying laws.

shootings claim that they – in part – were caused by "bullying," and have influenced forty-nine (49) states in America to pass anti-bullying laws. Many of these statutes mandate the implementation of reactive interventions and promising or effective "bullying prevention" programs be implemented (Piscatelli & Lee, 2011). In addition to the goal of protecting all students from physical and emotional harm, school leaders (e.g., principals, superintendents, and school board members) are painfully aware that if they have not implemented "effective" bullying prevention and intervention strategies they leave themselves open to litigation and lawsuits.

School climate is at its core about healthy, positive and connected relationships. In a real and concrete way, the ultimate remedy for bullying, no matter how it is defined, is to create school climates that are not supportive of any kind of mean-spirited behaviors, including but not limited to bullying and harassment. Consequently, true bullying prevention is identical to school climate improvement.

Today, most PK – 12 schools', districts', and states' so-called bullying prevention efforts are devoted to implementing short term instructional lessons and/or programs that have minimal or no positive effect on truly preventing bullying (for a recent review of the research in this area, see Cohen, Espelage, Twemlow, Berkowitz and Comer, submitted for publication). If the focus of bullying prevention programs and strategies are separate and apart or different from school climate improvement efforts, then it is not surprising that mean-spirited

behaviors including but not limited to bullying and harassment continue.

The U.S. Department of Education and Human Services (2012) has begun to outline research-based guidelines pertaining to diminishing bullying. However, these guidelines do not provide detailed and practical guidelines about how to develop concrete and effective bullying prevention efforts, per se (Cohen, in press).

This brief summarizes research and best practices that do effectively prevent any kind of mean-spirited behaviors including but not limited to bullying and harassment which is identical to promoting safe, supportive, engaging and healthy school communities.

What are the essential elements[3] of a school climate informed effort to prevent mean, cruel and/or bullying behaviors?

Educational leadership: District and building leaders need to fully endorse and lead any and all effective school reform efforts, including school climate improvement. These leaders need to publically and authentically support comprehensive efforts not only to prevent mean, cruel, and/or bullying behaviors but also commit to create and maintain safe, supportive, respectful, and engaging climates for learning and development.

Engaging the whole school community: Students, parents/guardians, school personnel and, community members/leaders – need to be co-learners and co-leaders in effective school climate improvement efforts. A lack of engagement is one of the most common reasons

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[3] Detailed research-based support for these five elements can be found in Cohen, Espelage, Twemlow, Berkowitz & Comer (submitted for publication consideration).

why so many school reform efforts fail (Fullan, 2011; Mourshed, Chijioke, & Barber, 2010).

Assessment: Assessment is important not only as an engagement strategy but also to establish "baselines" to gauge progress over time. There are three levels of assessment that are helpful to consider:

1. *Readiness assessments* that support school leaders understanding how ready or not they are to embark on a school wide reform effort to prevent mean, cruel and/or bullying and promote a climate for learning;
2. Comprehensive school climate assessments (for recent independent reviews of school climate measures, see: Clifford, Condon, & Hornung, 2012; Gangi, 2010; Haggerty, Elgin, Woolley, 2011); and,
3. More *targeted bully-victim-witness assessments* via student led participatory action research and/or other surveys.

Policies, laws, rules and supports: Today, there are 49 States that have developed anti-bully laws (Piscatelli & Lee, 2012). Legally and psychosocially there is a powerful bully prevention trend that "blames" the bully and tends to focus on punishment as a solution. Roughly, a third of these 49 State laws are focused on identifying and punishing the bully. Eighteen states have laws that allow victims to seek legal remedies for bullying, either from schools that do not act or from the bullies themselves. Nine states require administrators to report bullying to police. These kinds of "zero tolerance" policies and laws are unhelpful to reduce mean, cruel and/or bullying behaviors (American Psychological Association, 2006; Fowler, 2011).

Helpful policies and district level supports as well as related codes of conduct need to: (1) enhance the whole school community learning and working together to understand their shared vision for what kind of school they most want and then working to develop rules, supports, and standards (e.g., laws and/or policies) and educational practices (e.g., school wide improvement efforts, instructional and one-one-one practices) that support this vision (e.g., National School Climate Council, 2009); (2) be aligned with research-based findings about what really helps to reduce mean, cruel and/or bullying behaviors (outlined below).

Strategies to Guide Effective Practice

Building on the four processes noted above, there are three essential aspects of day to day practice that support effective bully prevention efforts and school climate reform: school wide improvement practices; pedagogy; and, one-one-one/relational practices.

1. *Creating and sustaining a school wide* or systemic strategies designed to promote a safe, supportive prosocially-informed climate of social responsibility where students and adults alike think about "what's the right thing to do?" in caring and thoughtful ways. There are a wide range of systemic issues that shape school life including explicit and implicit norms; measurement practices; codes of conduct; goals; values; patterns of interpersonal relations; teaching and learning practices; leadership styles, disciplinary practices and includes all school leaders and school staff/support.
2. *Integrating and sustaining quality teaching and learning*: There are four

ways that educators can advance teaching and learning about bully-victim-witness dynamics in particular and promote prosocial education (e.g., character education, social, emotional learning and mental health promotion efforts) in general: (a) being a helpful living example/role model, (b) via classroom management strategies; (c) via a number of pedagogic strategies (e.g. cooperative learning; conflict resolution; service-learning; and, moral dilemma discussions); and, (d) actual prosocial curriculum. Hopefully, engaging students in meaningful ways colors and shapes all instructional efforts.

3. *Focus on one-on-one/relational practices*: There are three important aspects of one-on-one and related relational practices that are important for school leaders to consider. First, how will you support educators understanding about how to respond to a perpetrator – target situation in the moment as well as afterwards? Secondly, how can and will school leaders support more effective educator-parent-mental health partnerships that promote the recognition of students who chronically "fall into" the role of perpetrator and/or target? And, finally how we greet and treat one another.

Summary

The single most common school climate findings that our Center (and others) have discovered in our work with tens of thousands of schools across America is that students report feeling significantly unsafe in schools. And, educators and parents have not known this! Bully-victim-witness behavior is one of the most common and important interpersonal processes that contribute to these findings. Today, most bully prevention efforts are grounded in targeted programs and/or short-term curriculum that have minimal, if any, impact on bully-victim-bystander behavior.

In this brief we have summarized how effective bully prevention efforts are essentially comprehensive school climate reform efforts that engage students, parents/guardians, school personnel and ideally community members to be co-learners and co-leaders in understanding what the communities "vision" for an ideal school is; understanding the gap between this vision and current school life; and, working together – systematically, instructionally and in one-on-one relationships – to create an even safer, more supportive, engaging and flourishing school.

These efforts not only have profound and positive implication for truly effective bully prevention efforts. They also overlap with improvement efforts that focus on equity and harassment. Too often people in schools tolerate the subtle (and not so subtle) forms of mean-spirited, cruel behaviors that sometimes manifest as bias and prejudice. These civil rights matters can overlap with bullying but is a separate and fundamentally important dynamic.

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