

Bullying Prevention and School Climate Reform

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Editorial

Bullying is a complex behavior that can cause academic and social problems for students and can contribute to a negative school climate. It perpetuates an unhealthy environment for students depriving them of their right to be educated in a setting that is both physically and emotionally safe. If students are afraid to attend school or spend time at school worrying about safety rather than academics, they cannot learn. Olweus (1993) defines bullying as when a student or several students say or do mean or hurtful things to another student who has a hard time defending himself or herself. It may occur in person or through electronic means (cyberbullying). It can be direct in the form of verbal or physical bullying; it can also be indirect behavior such as spreading rumours or excluding someone from a group. Bullying is associated with both short term and long term consequences for the student who bullied, the student who was bullied, and the bystanders who see or know it is happening. These consequences can continue on to adulthood.

Research shows that children who are bullied experience lower self-esteem and higher rates of health problems, depression, loneliness, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. They can also experience withdrawal, aggression, and feelings of rejection. Children who bully others are at a higher risk for alcoholism, substance abuse, antisocial personality disorders, and externalizing problems such as violence and delinquency. Bystanders who observe bullying behavior without intervention may develop a decreased sense of individual responsibility or experience fear of retaliation if they get involved. They may have a heightened sense of anger, helplessness, and even guilt for not taking action.

The issue of bullying initially gained attention in the United States in response to school violence and more recently because of its potential effect on school climate and student performance. There is a growing awareness that academics and safety are both essential components of educational discourse. In environments where bullying is not addressed, students may feel unsafe, making it both physically and emotionally harder for them to learn.

There is also a growing interest in creating a positive school climate. In fact, school climate is one of the indicators of school quality in the new Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). A portion of ESSA requires states to incorporate non-academic factors into their accountability systems and State Educational Agency (SEA) plans must indicate how they will help districts address discipline, bullying and harassment, and improve school climate.

A common theme throughout research in the area of school climate is that students learn better in an environment that is characterized by support, respect, and a sense of belonging at the school. School climate research asserts that the essential components for feeling connected to school include students experiencing positive adult/student

relationships as well as physical and emotional safety. This type of healthy school environment cannot exist if bullying is happening in a school.

Bullying can negatively affect the climate of a school. Persistent bullying may even create a hostile learning environment that can interfere with a student's civil rights. In order to reduce bullying it is important to change the climate of the school and the social norms with regards to bullying. However, research shows that bullying problems in a school cannot simply be addressed by working to create a positive school climate; changes in school climate alone do not automatically create a change in prevalence of bullying incidents. Although bullying may have a negative impact on the climate of a school, there is not a clear inverse relationship.

While bullying prevention programs can contribute to a positive school climate, strategies to improve climate cannot be the sole component of bullying prevention initiatives. A comprehensive approach that teaches staff and students that bullying is unacceptable and empowers them to address bullying behaviors is needed. An effective program will address bullying at the school level, in the classroom, through additional support for individuals involved, and by involving families and communities.

Bullying prevention and intervention efforts need to be intentional and should also address the issue on multiple levels. Such a multi-tiered approach includes universal prevention programs that strengthen skills for all students in the school, selective preventive interventions for students who are at risk for bullying others or being bullied, and indicated interventions that provide intensive support for students involved in bullying situations.

In addition to being multi-component and multi-level, bullying prevention and intervention programs need to involve all adults at the school. Bullying is not the sole responsibility of any single individual; therefore it requires the buy-in and effort of everyone in the school environment. Olweus (1993) concluded that the attitudes, routines, and behaviors of school personnel can be a contributing force in bullying behavior.

When teachers and other adults in a school fail to recognize or ignore bullying it sends a message that it is acceptable behavior, thus perpetuating a climate of bullying. Comparatively, when schools provide a safe learning environment in which adults model positive behavior, they can mitigate the negative effects of bullying.

A growing body of research indicates a relationship between bullying and academic achievement. Research also shows a relationship between school climate and academic success. Accordingly, changing the climate of a school is imperative if it is embedded with beliefs and conduct that support bullying behaviors.

Successful bullying prevention requires a long-term commitment and must become part of the school culture,

woven into the school environment in such a way that it becomes a daily part of school life.

Should schools focus on bullying prevention or school climate reform? It can no longer be viewed as an either or proposition. Addressing school climate with an intentional focus on bullying is essential for meeting the academic and safety needs of all students in a school.

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